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ISSUE 336



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PC GAMER

#336 NOVEMBER 2019

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"I'M THRILLED TO BE TAKING OVER AS PC GAMER'S EDITOR"

**ROBIN VALENTINE****Specialist in**

Being the New Guy

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This month

Rediscovered the joy of magazine deadlines.

can tell, but also to experiment with its core action in really exciting new ways.

And speaking of change – hello! I'm thrilled to be taking over as PC Gamer's editor this month, steering the magazine as it enters a new era of its own.

ROBIN VALENTINE
MANAGING EDITORrobin.valentine@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team

**ANDY KELLY****Specialist in**

Drinking tiny, cheap German beers

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This month

Headed to GamesCom to pick up a fresh plate of gamespreviewurst.

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This month

Offered the benefit of his hard-won wisdom, like a six foot two Yoda.

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Investigated the world's flattest game studio in Bordeaux.

**WES FENLON****Specialist in**

Giant floppies

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This monthUncovered a treasure trove of ancient Japanese relics... such as the *Casablanca* PC game.

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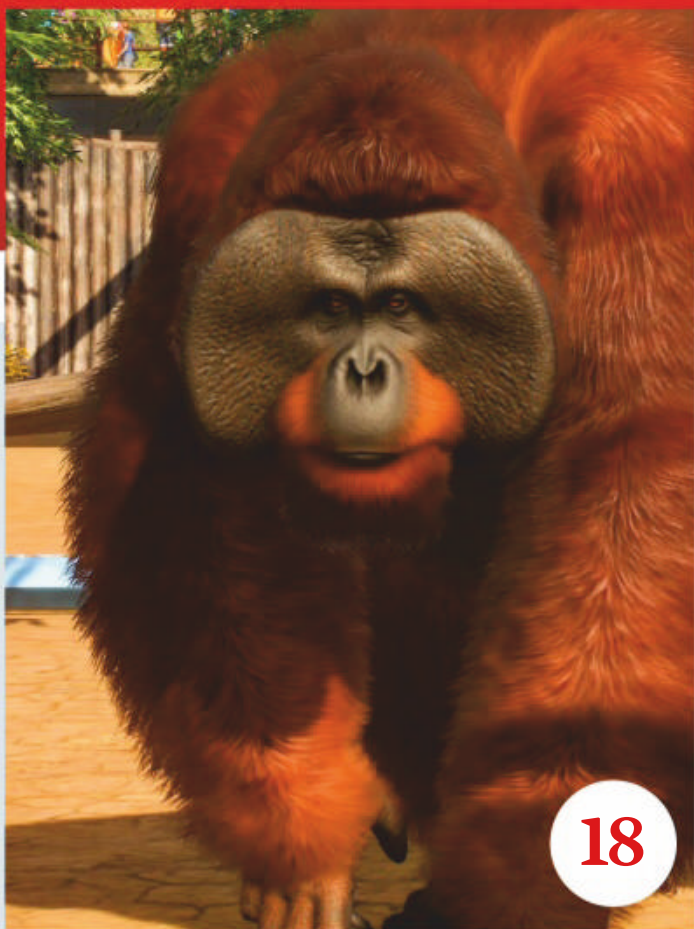
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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



The Walking Dead is now managed by Skybound, who finished the final season.

TELLTALE CHEATS DEATH

But **THE WALKING DEAD** taught us to be wary of the resurrected...

What's in a name? Less than you might think. A company called LCG

Entertainment announced the return of Telltale Games to the US press this month, just under a year after the venerable adventure game studio was shut down. This new doppelganger plans to sell games from Telltale's back catalogue and to work on new entries for some of its episodic series.

"We're still evaluating, but we definitely want to continue some of the stories," Jamie Otilie tells

Polygon. Otilie was CEO of a mobile developer behind licensed takes on Duck Dynasty and Power Rangers, while his business partner, Brian Waddle, marketed the Havok physics engine – the same one that's been adding splash screens and wobbly objects to PC games for two decades.

THE COMPANY IS STARTING SMALL AND HOPING TO OUTSOURCE WORK

What neither have is prior history with Telltale. Instead, they're hoping to ensure continuity by offering freelance work to former staff. There'll be no full-time roles yet, though. The company is starting small and hoping to outsource work like animation and motion capture.

It's good news for Telltale's back catalogue, some of which has disappeared from digital stores since the developer's closure. There's history to preserve there, extending back not just to *The Walking Dead*, but earlier to episodic sequels for *Monkey Island* and *Sam & Max* – more traditional adventures tied to the company's roots in LucasArts.

STORE TOUR

STEAM LABS



It's a small thing, but you can now tell the Steam store that you've played a game via another store. As Steam increasingly moves towards algorithmic curation and recommendations, it's nice to be able to explain to it that, yes, I do like *The Witcher 3*, I just don't want to play it on you. ■PS

HONK ON

UNTITLED GOOSE GAME



Apparently choosing to embrace its long-standing lack of a name, this utterly delightful water fowl simulator has finally been given a firm release date of September 20. Gaming and comedy aren't always the most natural bedfellows, but *Untitled Goose Game*'s latest trailer had me in bits. ■RV



HOMEWARD BOUND

HOMEWORLD 3



The original Homeworlds are some of the best real-time strategy games on PC, so I was delighted to hear that Gearbox is publishing *Homeworld 3*. It's being developed by Blackbird Interactive, who was responsible for those recent excellent HD remasters, so I think it's in good hands. ■AK



ABOVE, TOP: A sequel to *The Wolf Among Us* was in development when Telltale folded.

ABOVE, BOTTOM: Telltale was formed by developers who worked on LucasArts adventure games.

In later years Telltale became beloved by a different audience. After *The Walking Dead*, it was famed for snappily-paced narrative games that offered heavy consequences for choices made against the clock. It's these games the new Telltale might struggle to revive – the *Walking Dead* licence now belongs to Robert Kirkman's Skybound, which has its own games publishing division. The rights for a *Stranger Things* adaptation planned before last year's closure, meanwhile, have reverted to Netflix. And the fate of other studio high points like *Tales From the Borderlands* remain a mystery.

A studio is more than its licences and the new Telltale doesn't have access to most of the talent that made up its namesake. The new company is situated in Malibu, California, a six-hour drive from the original studio's location in San Rafael. One hell of a commute, especially if it might not result in full-time work.

What's more, Telltale's staff were given no severance pay when the studio suddenly imploded last September, sending more than 250 developers scrambling for work. Understandably, they're not all in a hurry to return. "The way Telltale ended was traumatic," former Telltale narrative designer Emily Grace Buck tweeted. "Working conditions there weren't ideal. We've moved on."

Jeremy Peel

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Orcs Must Die 3

Robot Entertainment is back to their tower defence best with a sequel.

Yakuza 7

An old April Fools gag turned out to be a stealth announcement, heralding a switch to turn-based combat.

Cyberpunk 2077

CD Projekt Red has removed fixed gender options from its RPG to make it more inclusive

CS:GO

Australian police arrested six *Counter-Strike* players after alleged match fixing. It's a disappointing knock to esports' credibility.

Ion Fury

Developer Voidpoint walked back an apology for homophobic content found in the FPS. This isn't what 'throwback shooter' should mean.

Nutaku

The adult gaming platform wants to see even more porn games on Steam. Is that possible?



The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

You've probably read about the exploits of actors so desperate for an award nomination that they'll put themselves through absurd, antisocial tests of endurance. Hollywood calls this method acting, because you can excuse pretty much anything as long as you've branded it. The Spy sees such shenanigans and can't help but think "Pfft, amateurs". Sending used condoms to your co-stars isn't 'method', Jared, it's just being a shitty colleague.

When The Spy goes method – ie, creates an entirely new persona for the purpose of infiltrating enemy territory and extracting information – The Spy fully commits. Just last week, The Spy flew to Japan on an assumed identity in an attempt to ascertain the PC prospects of the remaining *Yakuza* series, as well as Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio's spin-off detective series *Judgment*. Unfortunately The Spy's alter-ego was a sad sack gambler frittering away their life savings in a doomed attempt to pay off massive debts.

And so The Spy spent the week playing illegal games of Cho-Han in a dingy basement in an indistinct alley somewhere in Tokyo.

Thanks to The Spy's finely honed senses, which easily discern a twitch of the flexor tendon and echolocate the exact position of each die, The Spy can predict the

outcome of each roll with 99.94 per cent accuracy. Alas, in that hall, The Spy was Not The Spy, and Not The Spy was on the verge of losing The Spy's house. The Spy was so busy predicting the wrong outcome of every bet that The Spy didn't have time to do any information gathering. That's how the job goes. You've got to commit to the act.

VG247 had more luck uncovering info about the series' future. The site asked franchise producer and *Yakuza 3* director Daisuke Sato whether the *Yakuza Remastered Collection* would be coming to PC. The *Remastered Collection* – for those who've been too busy losing money in a poorly lit gambling hall to keep up with recent releases – is a bundle of remasters for *Yakuza 3*, 4 and 5. On consoles, the bundle is available for purchase now, and provides immediate access to *Yakuza 3*, with the latter two games due in the coming months.

Sato, when questioned about the bundle's PC prospects, was vague but not dismissive. "I can't comment on that at this very moment," he said, laughing. "But I wouldn't say it won't ever happen."

Taken purely literally that's not much to go on. Between now and the universe decaying to the point that time no longer works, the *Yakuza Remastered Collection* might come to PC. But there are reasons to be hopeful. Consider first that the *Yakzua* games that are on PC were all released in chronological order of story – starting with *Yakuza 0* and culminating last may with *Yakuza Kiwami 2*. The next games in that order are, of course, *Yakuza 3*, 4 and 5. Consider second that most of *Yakuza's* PC ports were unannounced with little fanfare, either soon before or on the day of their release.

And consider third what Sega Europe's executive vice president of publishing, John Clark, told PC Gamer back at E3. "It's in the mindset of [Sega] Japan and Europe now, and the US, to think of [*Yakuza*] as a multi-format offering," says Clark "That's not saying everything's going

to be multi-format, but we're able now to consider that data." Again, it's not exactly a firm commitment, but it is something. It's more than is in The Spy's bank account. Spy out. ■
The Spy

UNFORTUNATELY THE SPY'S ALTER-EGO WAS A SAD SACK GAMBLER



THE SPY
The Spy asks you to pick a card. It was the nine of clubs.

This month in... 2009



1 It's the end of the World... of *Warcraft*. Our cover feature this month explains why Blizzard were using the *Cataclysm* expansion to destroy, rebuild and thus fix huge chunks of the absurdly popular MMO.

It's particularly interesting to compare then and now, given that *WoW Classic* has just reestablished the 'broken' version to much acclaim.

ISSUE
206, November 2009
ON THE COVER
World of Warcraft: Cataclysm
IN CINEMAS
Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs

2 Remember Games for Windows Live? You couldn't escape it this month, thanks to *Batman: Arkham Asylum* and *Red Faction: Guerilla*. Good games; a dark time for PC gaming.



3 This issue's big list of 50 essential mods contains plenty of picks that are still great today. It features, among others, some classic total conversions, including *The Nameless Mod* and *Minerva: Metastasis*. It also features new stuff such as *Dear Esther*, which would become a standalone game, and a little something called *Defence of the Ancients*, which would become an entire genre.



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TRUE GAMING

Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES

Observation, No Code's fantastically atmospheric sci-fi puzzler.

AFTER THE LAUNCH

OBSERVATION dev on releasing a multi-year project into the wild

After years of pre-production, pitches, and prototypes, then 25 months of solid development, Glasgow-based developer No Code finally released sci-fi adventure *Observation* in May, 2019. I reviewed it for PC Gamer, calling it a “stylish, understated, and subtly chilling psychological thriller”, and other critics shared my enthusiasm for the game, which sees you playing as an artificial intelligence aboard a stricken space station.

That's a long time to work on anything, and I've always wondered: what does releasing a game feel like? So I asked *Observation*'s writer/director Jon McKellan, founder of No Code and former UI designer on *Alien: Isolation*, about the immediate aftermath of releasing a new videogame to the world.

“We were so guarded during development because we didn't want story spoilers getting out,” he says. “Then on release day you're watching people playing it on Twitch and it feels wrong. You've kept this thing internal for so many years, and it's been on your mind constantly, and suddenly it's out in the wild. It's a really bizarre feeling. The rules no longer apply.”

No Code makes weird games. Its debut, horror anthology *Stories Untold*, was a supremely strange puzzle

game based around a series of archaic machines. *Observation* sees you operating a space station as its governing AI. Nevertheless, both games have sold enough to keep the studio open – and it has, in fact, recently moved to a larger building to accommodate more staff.

Even so, towards the end of *Observation*'s development No Code was having something of a crisis of confidence. “You lose perspective when you're working on a game, because you're so close to it,” says McKellan. “And in the last six months, all you're doing is fixing all the imperfections. They're brought to your attention every day, so it's only natural that you start to lose confidence. You only see the bad things.”

CRITICAL MASS

Observation currently sits at 79 on Metacritic for the PC version and 74 for the PlayStation 4 version. Not too shabby for a niche puzzle game about a malfunctioning computer. “We were really happy when the reviews came in,” says McKellan. “Then a couple of days later people started talking about it on social media and discussing the story. At that point it was clear the game wasn't a total car crash after all. Maybe we got it right.”

The first review of *Observation* the team at No Code read was from Game Informer, who scored it an impressive 9/10. “That wasn't even a punch the air



Great Scots

No Code is a BAFTA-winning indie studio based in Glasgow, Scotland. Its first game was 2016's *Super Arc Light*, a well-received mobile game. Then it teamed up with Devolver Digital in 2017 to release *Stories Untold*, a stylish horror anthology, before releasing *Observation* (also with Devolver) in 2019. Studio founder Jon McKellan has worked on *Alien: Isolation* and *Red Dead Redemption 2*.



LEFT: No Code is a small Glasgow-based studio with big ambitions.

BEYOND THE WALL *Successful games developed in Scotland*



LEMMINGS

This puzzle/platformer was developed by DMA Design in Dundee. Since its release in 1991, *Lemmings* has sold over 20 million copies worldwide across multiple formats.



GRAND THEFT AUTO V

One of the best-selling games in history, generating an eye-watering \$6 billion in revenue since its release in 2013, was developed by Edinburgh-based Rockstar North.



CRACKDOWN

This open world shooter was developed by Dundee-based Realtime Worlds and sold over 1.5 million copies, becoming a valuable exclusive for Microsoft and its Xbox brand.



MINECRAFT

This is, of course, a Swedish game, but Dundee's 4J Studios was responsible for porting the game to consoles, including the hugely successful Xbox 360 version.

moment for us," says McKellan. "It was more like a massive sigh of relief. We can sleep now!" The game also received 9/10 reviews from Gamespot and Destructoid, although there were some lower scores too.

When the game was launched on Tuesday, May 21, publisher Devolver Digital sent No Code a crate of celebratory champagne. "We decided to down tools," says McKellan. "We were burned out, so we ordered in food, drank champagne, and jumped between random Twitch streams. When someone solved a problem we'd all cheer, or groan when someone got stuck at something, taking a mental note that we might have to patch it."

But *Observation's* development was far from over. The game underwent extensive QA testing, but when a game is released to the world, and is played on hundreds of thousands of different PC configurations, unexpected bugs are always going to pop up. "We had stuff like, 'I'm playing on Windows XP with an ultrawide monitor and this weird thing just happened,'" says McKellan. "I can't even replicate that setup, let alone fix it!"

"But by the time the game was released we'd been in bug fixing mode for half a year, so it was easy to stay in that frame of mind. It wasn't like we started a new phase of development. We just kept going. It can be exhausting, but the joy of seeing people playing and enjoying the game balances it out. That keeps you going. It would have been much worse if the game was poorly received and we had to keep working on it."

I wondered if McKellan was frustrated or surprised by parts of the game where people were getting stuck or lost. "There weren't many surprises, actually," he says. "A few months before *Observation* shipped we put the game through a series of focus tests. We had people test the game then submit a written report, and through that we worked out where the main sticking points were. Then we went into the game and changed a few things."

FINAL FRONTIER

As for the future of *Observation*, I ask McKellan if he has any desire to tell another story in the space station he and

his team spent so long researching and building. "We have a lot of pots on the boil at the moment," he says. "But we did get so used to spending time in that environment, and building it, that it feels a bit weird just throwing it away

"IT WAS MORE LIKE A MASSIVE SIGH OF RELIEF. WE CAN SLEEP NOW!"

when you're done with it.

"Our main takeaway from *Observation* is that we're never making a zero gravity game ever again. We've been talking about the next game quite a bit and we're all delighted that it has gravity. That's like a feature for us."

No Code's next game is currently unannounced, but it'll be a step up from *Observation* in terms of scope. "We were at capacity towards the end of *Observation's* development. So after the first couple of months of bug fixing and patches we decided to move. This gives us a lot more options. Now we're in a much better place." ■

Andy Kelly



In Fo

THE HIDDEN DETAIL



RIGHT: Early concept art of the modular mutation system.



FREE RADICALS

Double Fine project lead Lee Petty on the wild and wonderful mutations of '80s-inspired roguelike **RAD**. *By Robin Valentine*

SPARE CHANGE

1 "Mutations kind of go hand-in-hand with an apocalyptic setting, I'm always very interested in a player character whose identity is shifting over the course of the game, and mutation seemed a really interesting way to explore that."

BEYOND HUMAN

2 "One of one of the early things we said was, it was really interesting to see that as the world is somehow getting a little bit better the player character, although getting more powerful, is becoming something less than human."

LIVE A LITTLE

3 "You're sort of adapting to survive in this environment. And we wanted the mutations themselves to kind of be surprising as well, thematically and visually, so that maybe how to get the most out of them wasn't all on the surface."

MORPH SUIT

4 "I liked the idea that the characters themselves are relatively neutral. They don't have really crazy silhouettes. So we left room for the mutations to really kind of define the character, at least visually, as the game progresses."

MONSTER MUSH

5 "We structured the enemy mutants so that they didn't seem like an organised society, like they were not sentient or evolved. We didn't really want the player character to just be murdering a slightly different species than themselves."

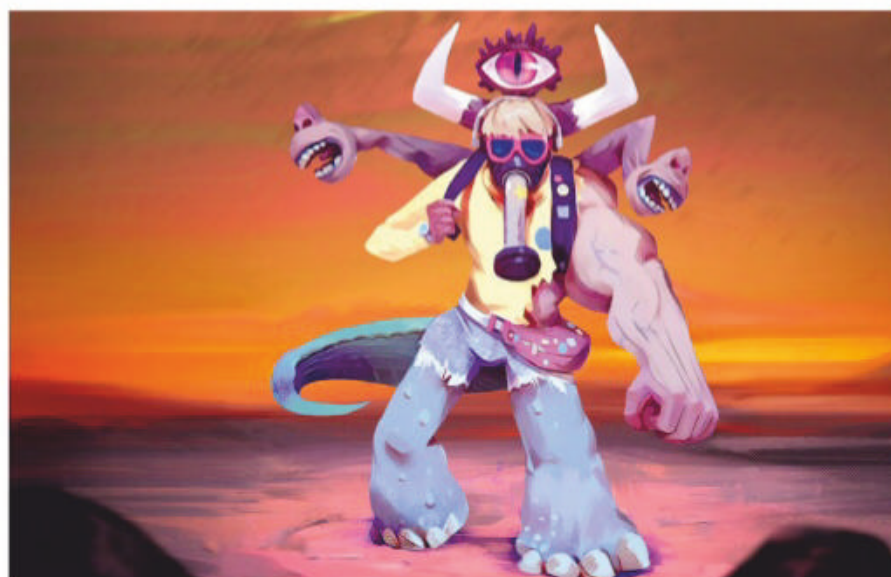
OUT OF TUNE

6 "We did have a brief moment early in pre-production where the game was called *One Man Band of the Apocalypse*. And it was more about crafting musical instruments instead of mutating. But it was horribly confusing!"

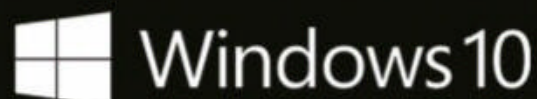


LEFT: "We made sure they all have glowing eyes, so if nothing else you always can see a pair of glowing orbs coming at you."

RIGHT: Concept art for *One Man Band of the Apocalypse*, the game that then mutated into *Rad*.



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PREVIEW





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
November 2019

DEVELOPER
Frontier Developments

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
planetzoo.com

PLANET ZOO

Keeping the animals happy in Frontier's zoo sim

Swinging the camera over my zoo, I watch throngs of people wander between enclosures, cooing at the animals and slurping soda. But then there's a ripple of panic. I see several guests fleeing in terror, and the fear spreads. Something is happening in my perfect zoo. I heave the camera into the air and locate the source of the rumble – an escaped rhinoceros.

Rhinos are dangerous animals, but it's lucky for my guests that *Planet Zoo* is a family friendly game. In Frontier's other park builder, *Jurassic World Evolution*, an escaped animal usually leads to people being eaten alive. But here it just makes them upset, which in terms of running and managing a successful (and profitable) zoo is still bad news. So the first job in this, my inaugural hands-on with *Planet Zoo*, is dealing with an escape.

My zoo isn't as perfect as I thought it was, because I'm currently experiencing a severe shortage of vets – a vital member of staff whose jobs include tranquillising escaped animals and returning them safely to their enclosures. I bring up the staff menu, click on the veterinarian button, and drop one directly into the park. It's that easy. More experienced vets demand higher wages, which is one of countless management decisions you'll have to make as you play *Planet Zoo*. I decide to splash out on a pro.

I plop the vet near the escaped rhinoceros and he immediately springs to action. He pulls out a tranq rifle with a scope and launches a dart into the beast's thick hide. She tries to run away, but it's too late. The tranquilliser kicks in and she slumps into a heap on the ground. The vet seals her in a crate, which magically shrinks to a size he can hold, then he automatically drops it off in the enclosure that was previously assigned to the

animal. But before I can release her I need to find out how exactly she escaped.

Surveying the enclosure, it's fairly obvious – there's a gaping hole in the electric fence surrounding it. I click on the existing fencing and I'm able to easily rebuild it by simply dragging my mouse cursor across the gap to fill it. Happy that all the holes have been plugged, I click on the crate and release the rhino back into her enclosure. Disaster averted. The guests, clearly over their trauma, flock to the area to marvel at the rehoused rhino.

And I understand why they're so impressed. I double click on the rhino to activate the animal camera, which lets me admire *Planet Zoo's* remarkable creatures up close. As she lumbers around the enclosure there's a genuine sense of weight and presence. She feels like a living thing, swinging her tail, flicking her ears, and sniffing the air. *Planet Zoo's* animators watched thousands of hours of nature documentaries, and it shows. You're going to spend a lot of time watching your animals with this camera mode.

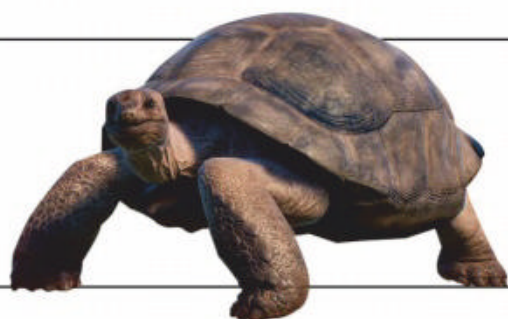
FUR HONOUR

Alas, I can't spend all day hanging out with the rhinos because I have more problems to solve. I drag the camera over to another enclosure and see a herd of pronghorn antelope wandering around a dusty field. I click on one, a female called Maple, and notice that the habitat meter on her welfare tab is very low. Animal welfare is one of the most important things in *Planet Zoo* and the quality of their enclosure is a big part of that.

Luckily I can see at a glance what I need to do to make this space more pleasant. A series of meters tells me that I have plenty of sand, but I need more grass, soil, and rock to balance it out. Every species in *Planet Zoo* has a particular type of terrain it feels comfortable in, which you'll have to cater to if you want them to lead long, happy lives. I click on the terrain tool and begin 'painting' the enclosure. I sprinkle some

PLAYED
IT

THE TRANQUILLISER KICKS IN AND SHE SLUMPS INTO A HEAP ON THE GROUND



Even ostriches need some mental stimulation.



➤ grass and some rock, and watch the welfare meter edge up.

Some animals like snow and you can paint it in your enclosure as easily as grass. But in a hot climate it won't stick unless you use a device called a cooler, which stops it from melting. But back to those pronghorn antelope, which seem much happier now that I've improved their enclosure. I activate the animal camera again and spin it around them, admiring their fluffy butts. The fur technology in *Planet Zoo* is really impressive.

Now I have some tapirs to deal with. Their habitat is fine, with just the right balance of terrain, but they're bored. This is because I haven't placed any enrichment items: toys, feeders, and other distractions designed to keep the animals in your zoo mentally stimulated. I bring up a build menu containing the game's vast collection of enrichment items, but the tapirs will only engage with some of them. Luckily, however, I can filter it by species.

Tapirs are natural foragers, so I drop a foraging box. They can snuffle around in here and dig out food, which will have a positive impact on their wellbeing. I also drop a barrel feeder, which they can stick their snouts in, and a rubbing pad for them to have a scratch on. You can place these objects anywhere, but the best location is always near a viewing platform or window. This means your guests will get some enjoyment out of them too.

I'm not done yet, though. A need specific to some species, including tapirs, is 'coverage', which is increased by filling an enclosure with plants and trees. Some animals, like those pronghorn antelope, prefer open spaces, but the tapirs prefer being surrounded by foliage. Clicking on the nature menu I'm presented with an enormous selection of plant life, and I litter the tapir enclosure with monkey puzzle trees and lobster claw plants – species native to the hot South American climate my zoo is currently situated in.

There are, of course, even more plates to spin. But compared to some management games, such as the frenetic *Two Point Hospital*, the plates in *Planet Zoo* spin quite slowly. My next job is cleaning my crocodile's enclosure – specifically the water, which has turned a

rather disgusting shade of brown. Not only is this bad for the animal, but it obscures the guests' view. I switch to a heatmap that shows me the water quality, and it's currently blazing red, illustrating that sorting this out is a priority.

I select a water treatment facility from the build menu, and it's as easy as dropping it in the vicinity of the water to clean it. But there's a layer of strategy to this, because guests will be unhappy if they see the pumps churning away. So you'll have to place it in a way that's accessible to staff, by being connected to a path, but also hidden away.

You could build a wall around it, perhaps. Or just obscure it with a scattering of foliage. Out of sight, out of mind. It doesn't take much to upset the roving herds of guests lining the pathways of *Planet Zoo*, which means you're constantly battling to keep them happy.

The water clears and my croc goes for a swim. A crowd of guests watch excitedly through the glass, and nearby is a screen that gives them information about what they're seeing. The more research you do, the more info appears here, increasing the educational potential of your zoo. Reflecting modern zoos, *Planet Zoo* is all about understanding animals and looking after them, rather than just thinking of them as commodities to be exploited.

TIGER STYLE

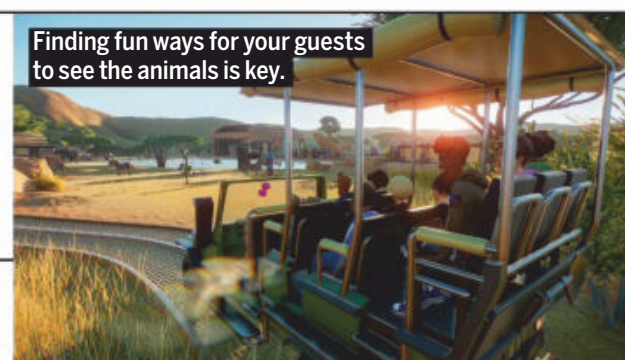
Finally, I get a taste of what it's like to invite a new animal to the zoo. I spend \$15,000 on a magnificent Bengal tiger named Farhan, who I discover is a rescue animal. An animal's upbringing, as well as other factors, will affect their size, longevity, fertility, and immunity to disease. Farhan has a 100 per cent rating for size, but only 33 per cent for immunity, meaning he might get sick easily. But when I drop him into my zoo the guests love him.

It's clear this demo was set up to give me a taste of a bunch of different game systems in one sitting, but even in this slightly artificial environment I can tell that I'm going to lose hours of my life to *Planet Zoo*. It combines the deep, freeform, expressive building of *Planet Coaster* with some really quite remarkable animals. They move, act, look, and sound just like the real thing, and taking care of them has a lot of interesting, engaging layers of strategy, not to mention managing budgets, building the zoo itself, and more besides. This could be Frontier's greatest park builder yet.

Andy Kelly



PLANET ZOO IS ALL ABOUT UNDERSTANDING ANIMALS AND LOOKING AFTER THEM



PREVIEW

Kerbal Space Program 2



Rocket launches now look much more dramatic.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Spring 2020

DEVELOPER
Star Theory

PUBLISHER
Private Division

LINK
kerbalspaceprogram2.com

KERBAL SPACE PROGRAM 2

Interstellar travel and colony building are coming to *Kerbal*

When you land on a celestial body in *Kerbal Space Program 2*, whether it's the Mun or another planet entirely, your mission doesn't end with you planting a flag. This sequel to Squad's science-based space sim, now developed by a team of *Kerbal* fans called Star Theory, will let you establish a colony on the surface and watch it grow.

"We have a colony editor that's very similar to the vehicle editor," says creative director Nate Simpson. "But it takes place in situ. You have a parts palette, but you're also looking at actual physical terrain."

But you won't suddenly see a space metropolis spring up, you have to start small. "When you build your first colonies you'll be using these collapsible, prefabricated modules," says Simpson. "They're actually inflatable, and you'll build your first structures with those. Then, over time, you'll unlock new things for your base."

This is tied to the population of your colony. Only a handful of Kerbals will occupy your first, most basic settlement, but over time they'll reproduce and your population will increase, granting you access to new technology. But how do you get more Kerbals?

"We've found a way to couple progression not to the passage of time, but to progress," explains Simpson. "If we had timer-based resource collection or something like that, you could game the system, because *Kerbal Space Program* lets you control the flow of time. So

ONLY A HANDFUL OF KERBALS WILL OCCUPY YOUR FIRST, MOST BASIC SETTLEMENT

FIRST LOOK

instead we've linked colony growth to your achievements instead."

Simpson is a little vague here, because he doesn't want to give away all the game's secrets. "When you do something of note in the game," he says, without elaborating. "Kerbals celebrate by multiplying. We think this is a great system because it makes progression organic. You can't just zoom time. You have to do interesting stuff."

BEYOND THE INFINITE

Another exciting new feature in *Kerbal Space Program 2* is interstellar travel. Not only can you build colonies in your home system, but you can establish them in other star systems too – if you build a ship that can survive the treacherous journey.

Even getting a giant interstellar ship out of its dock without it exploding will be a challenge, but a satisfying one. "I love the Star Trek-style pageantry of undocking a massive ship," says Simpson. "You can even build little space tugs to pull it out of its parking spot. It's beautiful to see. It's moving!"

I ask Simpson what we can expect to find in other star systems, and he's understandably reluctant to give me too many firm details. "We want all of our celestial bodies to present unique landing challenges," he says. "We want to think of these new planets as being puzzles that you solve with craft design. And as you move deeper into the universe, there'll be more diversity in these landing challenges."

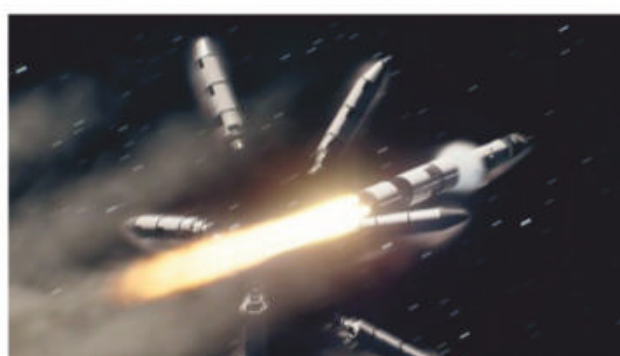
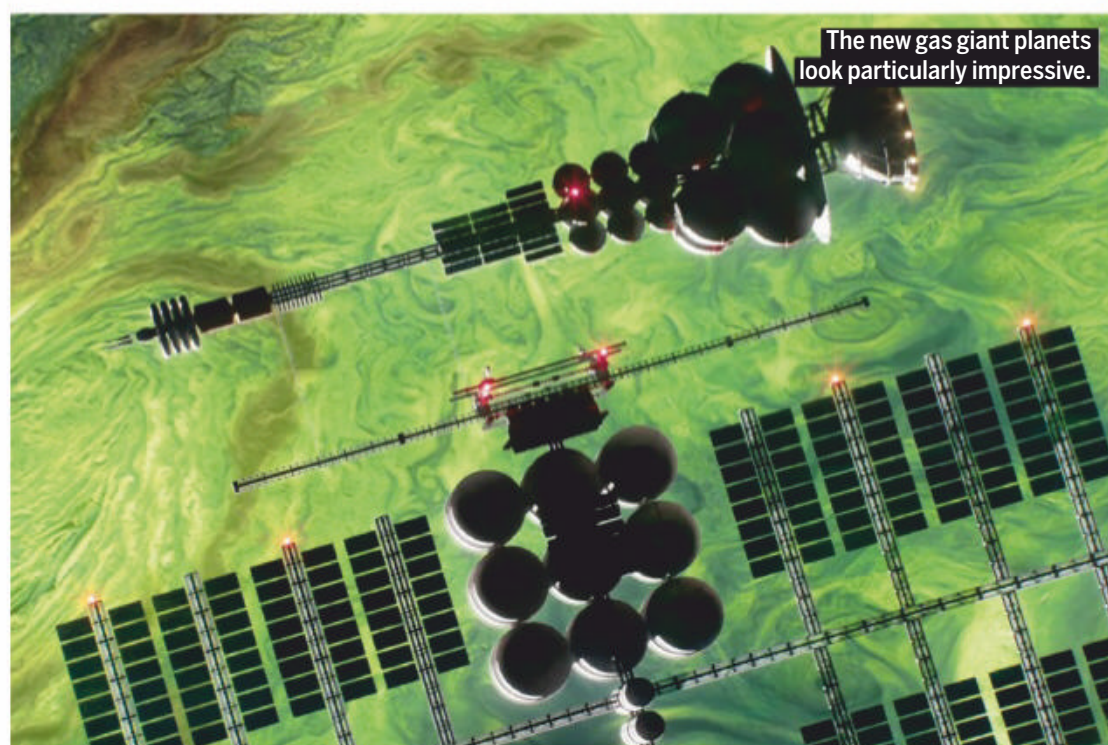
Kerbal Space Program 2 will also be notably prettier than its predecessor. This is especially obvious in its rocket launches and explosions, which feature impressive lighting and smoke effects. "That's just a little icing on the cake," says Simpson. "I've always thought *Kerbal* was beautiful. That first sunrise when you achieve your first orbit. But we've gone through several generations of graphics technology since then, so we'll have a lot of improvements."

Kerbal Space Program 2 is set for release in spring next year. Original developer Squad will continue to update and support the first game, but it's clear from Nate Simpson's enthusiasm that Star Theory knows what it's doing, and will take the series to new heights.

Andy Kelly



Getting something this big into orbit is a challenge.



Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord

Your character joins the battle alongside your troops.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
TaleWorlds

PUBLISHER
TaleWorlds

LINK taleworlds.com/en/Games/Bannerlord

MOUNT & BLADE II: BANNERLORD

Crashing castles in a massive medieval sandbox

I'm determined to own a castle. A big fortress with thick walls and tireless guards willing to throw their lives away for me. Good thing, then, that *Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord*'s demo plunks me in the mid-game, with loads of gold to spend on warriors. Finally, this humble writer is going places.

PLAYED IT

First order of business – build an army. Instead of recruiting individual troops to take with me on my grand adventure, I hire captains, each with their own wee army. Prior to being hired, these mercenaries wander around the map and do their own thing, so it takes some time for them to merge with my growing horde.

With the extra time, I search for a target. I'm in luck, as I'm already working for an empire that's at war with another faction, and they've got territory nearby. I start the siege and a camp sprouts up around it, letting me build siege equipment. Unfortunately, soldiers from



the fortress sneak out at night and sabotage my ballista. Nervous about another counterattack, I begin the assault.

These fights can be auto-resolved, but I'm a hands-on boss. It's dawn, with the sun slowly coming up behind my army and the huge, imposing silhouette of the fortress ahead of us. I've got direct control of my character, who can ride around, stabbing and slashing with his sword and spear, but I can also command my units. I keep some of them back, so they don't get filled with arrows, and push up the siege towers and battering ram.

The gate is quickly smashed, my troops swarm in, and by the time I've hopped over the remains of the battering ram, the enemy surrenders the castle. We outnumbered them a little bit. OK, a lot.

THE CASTLE IS NOW PART OF THE EMPIRE AND, AFTER A VOTE, IT'S GIVEN TO ME

The castle is now part of the empire and, after a vote, it's given to me.

WITHIN THE KEEP

Exploring my new home, I get to know some nobles, spend far too long playing an extremely boring minigame and finally sit on my throne. Conversations give me new things to look up in *Bannerlord*'s encyclopedia, so I can learn about all the movers and shakers and their relationships, letting me prepare for my life as a politically savvy lord.

With political clout, a whole new world opens up. I start throwing my weight around and try to push forward new policies, shaping the empire, and find the people I need to bring over to my side if I want to rule it myself. Lamentably, my dreams are too big for the brief demo and my tenure as lord is cut short.

Bannerlord offers up a bewildering number of distractions and paths, but there's a thrill in just jumping down the rabbit hole and seeing where it takes you. At first all you want is a castle, but before long you're plotting world domination...

Fraser Brown



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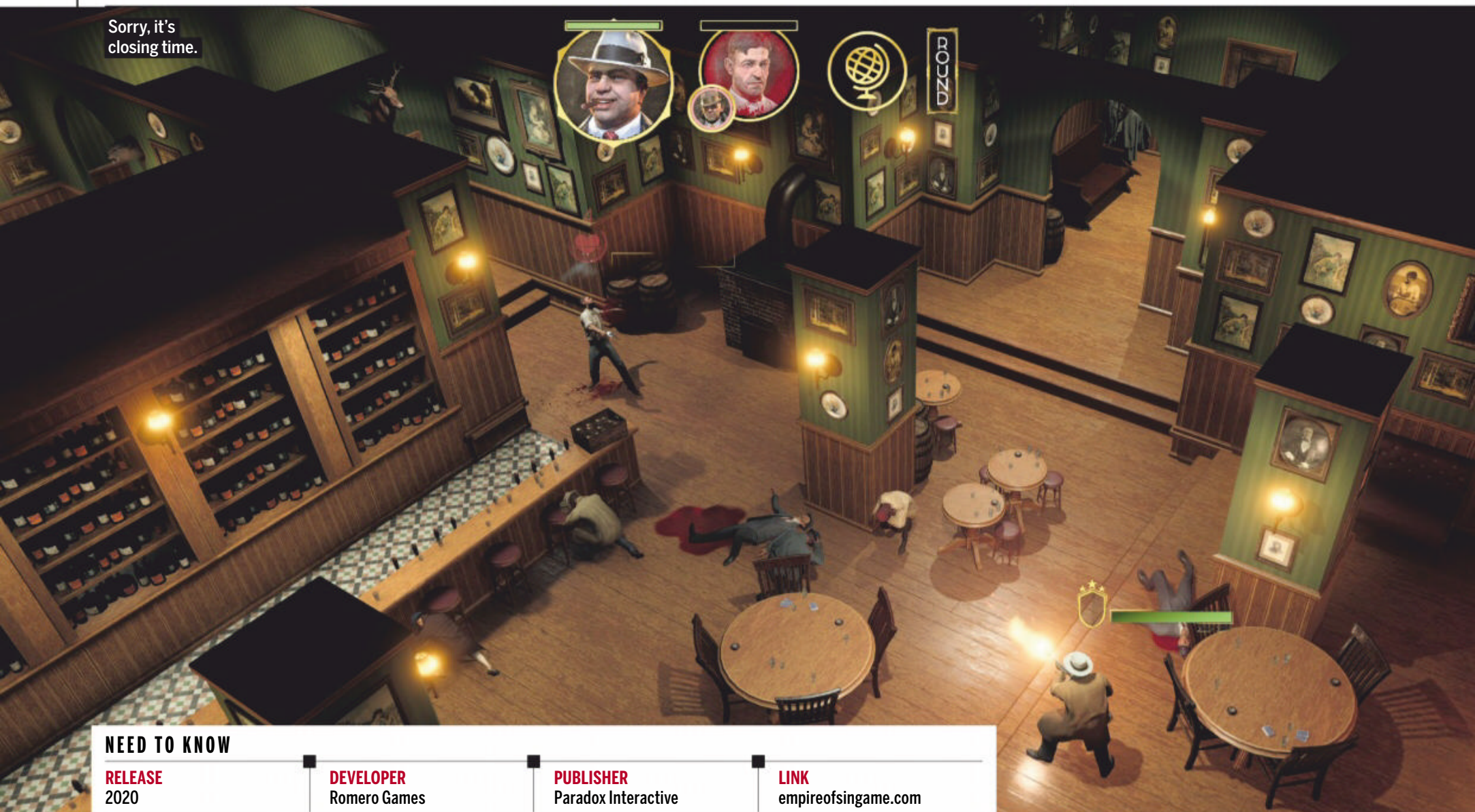
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PREVIEW

Empire of Sin

Sorry, it's closing time.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2020

DEVELOPER
Romero Games

PUBLISHER
Paradox Interactive

LINK
empireofsingame.com

EMPIRE OF SIN

Trying to make a crooked buck in prohibition Chicago

I've just shot up a mob business and, under the laws of Chicago in the 1920s, it now belongs to me. Ownership is straightforward in *Empire of Sin*, and corporate takeovers are bloody. Within a few moments it's up and running again and I can get on with the real dirty work of this crooked management sim – making cash.

PLAYED IT

My time with the game is fleeting and I have a criminal empire to forge, so I quickly start hiring some employees. Not bartenders or croupiers, but gangsters.

The first is a muscular gentleman called Baby, and the other is Maria, who I am immediately informed has become an alcoholic. What a gang...

Gang members develop traits in and out of combat. If Maria hung around brothels instead of bars, she could get a sexually transmitted disease, which could then spread to her partner and, if they broke up, to even more people. "I'm not



proud of it," says game director Brenda Romero when she explains how it can spread, "but there were brothels and there were consequences."

These traits and rashes have tangible ramifications, changing how effective gang members are when they're on the job. And while minions can be directly controlled and sent all over the city in real-time, as well as being commanded in turn-based tactical fights, they also have their own lives, families and secrets.

That means things can get complicated. One of your henchmen could fall in love with someone from another gang, and if you end up in a fight, they might refuse to shoot. Or they might have a weakness that could be exploited by the FBI, turning them into a snitch. If

the cops start showing up a lot, you might have a weak link in the chain and need to arrange to have a chat with your minion.

SNITCHES GET STITCHES

Maria's lover shows up in front of our HQ, shot up but still alive, then cops raid my speakeasy. Do I have a traitor in my organisation? I've got a few businesses now, which I've been tweaking to maximise profits, but I can't afford to start throwing all my money at the police. While some will accept bribes, others are Eliot Ness-types who won't stop until I'm in jail.

I spot some on the street corner and we open fire. *Empire's* combat broadly feels like gangster *XCOM*, immediately switching to a turn-based shootout.

I've got a few crooks rolling with me now, each of them with inventories full of guns and knuckle dusters and bats. We take a bruising, though, and I suddenly realise one of my fighters is just some old man who is nowhere near cover.

We barely make it out alive, but we do, just as I run out of time. I never do figure out if we had a snitch...

Fraser Brown

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PREVIEW

Cyberpunk 2077

Placide is the Voodoo Boys' second in command. Can you trust him?





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
April 16, 2020

DEVELOPER
CD Projekt RED

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
cyberpunk2077.com

CYBERPUNK 2077

How truth underpins everything on the streets of Night City

Cyberpunk creator Mike Pondsmith describes Pacifica, a district of Night City, as the “playground by the sea that didn’t work out”. I’m talking to him after seeing a new demo of *Cyberpunk 2077* set in this part of the game’s metropolis – a forgotten, lawless community built around the half-constructed ruins of abandoned luxury hotels.

“The way I looked at it, it was supposed to be like if Atlantic City had gone tragically wrong,” says Pondsmith, whose tabletop setting is being turned into an open world RPG by *Witcher* developer CD Projekt RED. Pacifica is very different from Watson, the vibrant, bustling commercial district seen in earlier *Cyberpunk 2077* demos. After beginning to construct massive skyscraper hotels, Pacifica’s investors pulled out and left it to rot – and that’s when the gangs moved in.

“There are all kinds of incredibly subtle details buried in the architecture of the city,” says Pondsmith, who strives to make sure that everything in the *Cyberpunk* setting is rooted in some kind of truth. “There’s a lot of familiar cyberpunk stuff there,” he says. “Neon, Japanese signs, trench coats. But there’s reality too. I was walking through Seattle at night once and I thought, yeah, I get it. This is why Night City works. It has a dark side, just like any city in the world today.”

Pondsmith remembers his time in San Francisco in the late 1980s, bar crawling with a friend, which was around the time

he wrote the original *Cyberpunk 2020* tabletop setting. “We were hitting some very strange bars, and some of them were just amazingly cyberpunk” he says. “Industrial bars, biker bars. We were walking through the rainy streets of San Francisco, and it was dangerous. I had a big-ass afro and mirror shades, and I was packing a nine-inch knife.”

Pondsmith has poured experiences like this into his writing, and is continuing to do so with *Cyberpunk Red*, a new edition of the tabletop game, and of course *Cyberpunk 2077* itself. But he’s always looking for new experiences too, whether that’s handling guns (he owns several) or, as he explains to me, stress-testing a new bulletproof backpack he’s been wearing lately.

PACK SHOT

“Yeah, I have a bulletproof backpack,” he says. “I got it because we talk about bulletproof clothing and gear in *Cyberpunk*. I’ve been thinking about its weight, how it fits into the environment, whether people notice it. Then when I get home we’re gonna take it out onto the range and we’re gonna put a bunch of 9mm rounds into it. Is it really that bulletproof? We’ve seen the numbers, but let’s find out for sure.”

This might sound extreme, but it’s precisely why *Cyberpunk*’s setting is so exciting. It’s dense with detail, but it’s a functional detail, giving you a sense that this stuff has actually been thought about beyond aesthetics. Pondsmith even based the Trauma Team, a militarised rapid medical response crew, on the experiences of friends who were ranger medics and extracted people under fire.

Pondsmith has been working closely with CD Projekt RED throughout *Cyberpunk 2077*’s development, bringing his own very specific brand of authenticity to the project. “What we’re doing is a bit different from typical cyberpunk,” he says. “It’s not intellectual cyberpunk like *Blade Runner*, which is my favourite movie. But it’s not a total shoot-em-up either.

“It’s basically environmental, it’s personal, and I think people will be wable to relate to it. And I think it’ll be interesting to see if we’ve changed the markers of what cyberpunk is.”

Andy Kelly



Pacifica is one of Night City’s most dangerous districts.

“I HAD A BIG-ASS AFRO AND MIRROR SHADES, AND I WAS PACKING A NINE-INCH KNIFE”

Disco Elysium



Our hero, everybody.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2019DEVELOPER
ZA/UMPUBLISHER
Humble BundleLINK
zaumstudio.com

DISCO ELYSIUM

Become Sherlock in flares in this isometric RPG

I've only just managed to get this dead man down from the tree. First I had to get past the stench – no easy feat since the body's been there a week – and then sever the industrial rope he was hanging from. My partner suggested getting help. Pffft.

I waved him away and shot through the rope in a rare display of competence. On my other save, where I created a character with less impressive physical stats, I can't even get close to the body without vomiting and instead have to psych myself up by going away to think about it for half an hour.

Disco Elysium will let you play the kind of detective you want. Its selection of stats and skills can mimic a variety of 'cop-o-types' like the master of deduction, the Columbo who always has just one more question, the one who "just gets these flashes", the one who talks to dead people, and so on. Replaying its opening days I've been a tough guy who takes no nonsense and an unhinged sensitive who at one point began taking off his clothes to get a better sense of the air. "It's a technique of mine," I tried to explain to horrified onlookers as I unzipped my fly.

No matter what flavour of gumshoe you create though, your character is always a boozehound with amnesia, the one genre staple that remains true in every playthrough. You're always a loser who woke up on the floor missing a shoe.

YOU'RE ALWAYS A LOSER WHO WOKE UP ON THE FLOOR MISSING A SHOE

PLAYED IT

Disco Elysium encourages you to play to your skillset by giving each skill a voice. In the classic text box where NPCs answer questions, a skill like Authority will pop up to suggest that somebody needs to be manhandled, while Inland Empire – which takes subconscious insights and transforms them into dialogues with objects – has given my necktie the ability to suggest inappropriate things. Electro-Chemistry wants me to smoke a discarded cigarette butt while Visual Calculus is telling me the shoe size of footprints in the mud.

NIGHT FEVER

It's a glorious overflow of information. I have to block out irrelevant stuff like I'm telling Watson to shush because I'm on the edge of a breakthrough. For God's sake man would you just shut up, I'm trying to think here and I can't very well listen to you and my necktie at once.

To get prosaic for a second, all this is folded into a classic top-down RPG. I walk from location to location clicking on objects, picking up clues or just coins, then interrogating every character who will let me climb their dialogue tree.

It's *Planescape: Torment* if instead of being based on Dungeons & Dragons it was more like *Life on Mars* or China Mieville's novel *The City And The City*.

The thing about mysteries is that everything hinges on the solution, and if it falls apart at the finish that makes the time spent getting there feel wasted.

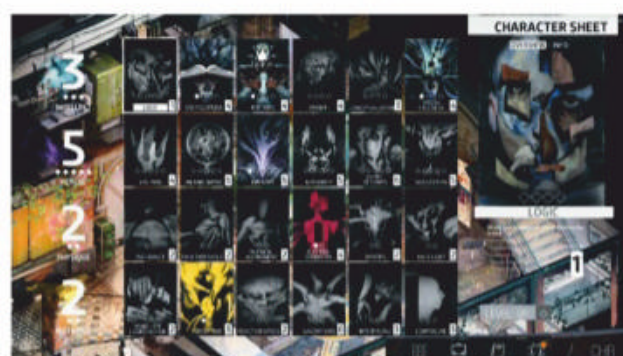
The opening hours of *Disco Elysium* give me confidence, though. The writing's perfect for the genre, poetic in a 'Raymond Chandler sneaking something profound past his editor' way, and there's a lot of detail to uncover. A side task to explore abandoned shops that might be cursed blows out into something far bigger than I expected.

What's more, playing through the opening a second time with a different loadout is just as interesting, changing the tone like I'm watching a reboot with a different director. Now I want to go back a third time as a super-genius who can analyse tyre tracks and tell you what car they came from while snapping at my long-suffering sidekick. The game's afoot, even if I've only got one shoe.

Jody Macgregor



Failed skill checks stay in the tasklog until you level up and try again.



PREVIEW

Everspace 2

Now this is what a space dogfight should look like.



Asteroid fields contain hidden items.

This enemy base is perched atop a spinning asteroid.

Fuel Tanks (0/7)
Boost Structures (0/1)
Turrets (0/6)
Banners (0/4)





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2021DEVELOPER
Rockfish GamesPUBLISHER
In-houseLINK
www.everspace.game

EVERSPACE 2

Rockfish's pretty space shooter goes open-ish world

The first *Everspace* was a great roguelike, blending fast-paced space combat with a compelling upgrade system that let you inch closer to victory every time you died. It was also very pretty, with some of the most incredible sky... sorry, *spaceboxes* on PC.

The sequel, developed by the same team at Rockfish Games, is taking those sumptuous visuals and everything else that made the original great and expanding the scope massively. No longer limited to a linear path, you can now travel freely around the galaxy – albeit with a few subtle loading breaks hiding the joins.

Straying true to the accessible combat of the first *Everspace*, this isn't a deep sim like *Star Citizen* or *Elite Dangerous*. You won't be carefully docking or slowly travelling between systems. The focus here is squarely on dogfighting, dodging, dashing, and rolling between laser blasts, taking on enemy ships, and collecting loot.

Rockfish is promising a 20-30 hour-long campaign, as well as a selection of optional side missions. It has everything you'd expect from a roguelike: loot, classes, talents, skills, and so on. It's clear *Destiny 2* is an influence, especially when you see the game's slick UI in action. But that vast galaxy gives it a unique edge.

It's not entirely seamless, but that's because each location has been hand-crafted by Rockfish's talented artists. Procedural generation is great, but it's obvious at a glance that the locations

in *Everspace 2* have been carefully crafted. They look incredibly dramatic, with screen-filling planets, vivid nebulas, and twinkling asteroid fields.

In early footage I notice the screen fade to white, for less than a second, as the player jumps into a new system. This is how they're hiding the loading, at least for now. But if achieving visuals like this means sacrificing complete seamlessness, I'm all for it.

Rockfish is also using a technique whereby the lighting in a scene is pre-baked, rather than in real-time, which gives them fine control over how everything looks – and the results on this page speak for themselves.

EXTRA CREDIT

Rockfish also wants to make its galaxy worth exploring, and I see an example of this when the person playing the demo finds a crack in an asteroid, blasting it to reveal a bunch of hidden items. You'll also pick up side missions from strangers as you explore the galaxy, giving you another reason to regularly fly off the beaten path.

Customisation is an important part of the *Everspace* formula, and Rockfish is doubling down on it in the sequel.

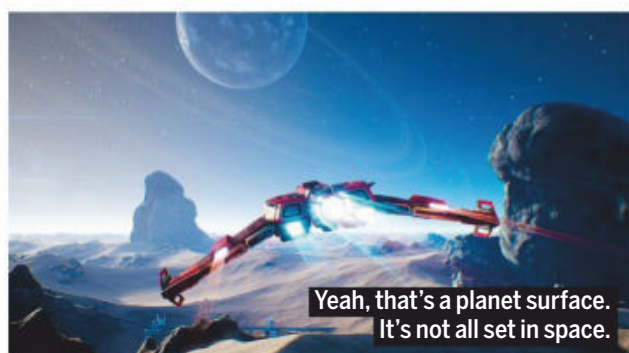
There are nine ship classes to choose from, each of which can be tailored to your own specific play style using combinations of weapons, modules, and other quality-tiered items looted during play. If you played *Everspace* you'll be familiar with shiny items dropping out of pretty much everything you interact with, and it's the same deal here.

As for the story, *Everspace 2* is set in the aftermath of the original. You play as one of the surviving clone pilots who defeated Admiral Gorkh, and now find yourself wanted by the authorities for going rogue. When the game starts you're undercover, trying to live a normal life as a space miner, but that ain't gonna last.

I loved the original *Everspace*, but there was always a feeling that I wanted to break free from those pretty, but pretty narrow, space corridors, which makes this ambitiously rescoped sequel exciting. 'Cause sometimes I can't be bothered slowly flying between systems in *Elite* to deliver fish. Sometimes I just wanna blast some fools out of the sky. Er, space.

Andy Kelly

YOU PLAY AS ONE OF THE SURVIVING CLONE PILOTS WHO DEFEATED ADMIRAL GORKH



Yeah, that's a planet surface.
It's not all set in space.

PREVIEW

Cook Serve Delicious 3



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
January 2020

DEVELOPER
Vertigo Gaming Inc

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
cookserve-delicious.com

COOK SERVE DELICIOUS 3

Alright, sure, it's the apocalypse – no need to make a meal out of it

Like most great cooking games, the *Cook Serve Delicious* series is only partly about food preparation. What it really aims to simulate is the adrenaline-fueled stress of a restaurant kitchen, the fight to keep up with hungry customers. Its new sequel looks even more deliciously nail-biting, sending your eatery on the road across a war-torn, near-future USA.

The leap to an apocalyptic sci-fi setting may seem a strange one, but the series has been laying the groundwork for years. "For a long time we've been quietly building the lore in *CSD 1* and *2* via the in-game email system and food descriptions," explains the game's director David Galindo. "*CSD 2* is a straightforward game in place and setting, or one would assume that unless they read the lore, where it was revealed the game was set in the future and massive wars were taking place. With *CSD 3* your tower is literally destroyed and you're faced with this huge world we've been building."

But while that means driving around in an armoured van and exchanging gunfire with rival road-chefs, the focus of the game is ultimately still on food. "Cooking is the core of the game, even more so than any of the games before it," says Galindo. "Originally I had a whole combat gameplay scenario planned out, but ultimately it just got in the way of cooking food as quickly as possible." The game still needs some time in the oven, but will launch in Steam Early access in January next year.

Robin Valentine

"I DON'T THINK PEOPLE ARE READY FOR HOW FAST THIS GAME CAN BE!"

1 "I've taken out the chores, side dishes and drinks dynamic so players can just focus on making delicious foods," says Galindo. It's a surprising but potentially smart bit of streamlining – in past entries, mechanics such as washing dishes added variety but little depth.

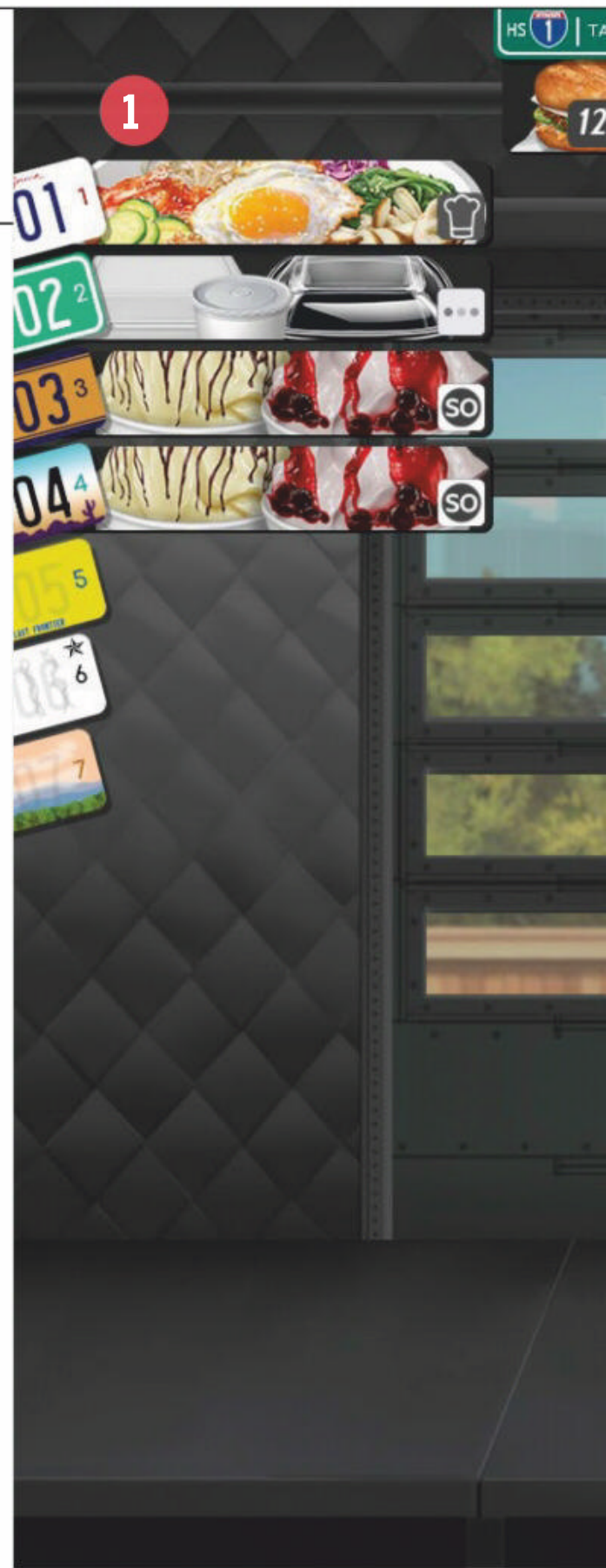
2 "I was worried the change in focus would make this too simple or boring, but early play tests have proven that the extreme pace of the game benefits the new focus on cooking only. I don't think people are ready for how fast this game can be!"

3 "I have to know how to properly make a food in order to know the assets I need drawn by the artists," says Galindo. "After working on a *CSD* game my YouTube algorithm is shot and I have thousands of recommended food videos for months." The resulting in-game art is mouth-watering.

4 Making food is a case of hitting the right keys in sequence to combine the ingredients. Some dishes can be pre-prepared, and are stored in the top bar. On the left, your orders queue up, each with its own timer until the customer leaves in a huff.

5 "For this one I wanted to make a more traditional campaign with the set goals of the first game and the open endedness of the second, but on a more linear path," says Galindo. *CSD 3* features a voiced story campaign following your adventure across the war-torn country.

6 You're joined by two android helpers, Whisk and Cleaver. They're a cheery pair who keep you safe from enemies and wise-crack while you cook. Both are voiced by Twitch streamers – Whisk by gaming personality Negaoryx, and Cleaver by tabletop roleplayer Vana.





COVER FEATURE

GODS IVION

COVER FEATURE

CLASSICS

STERS

History and mythology collide in
Creative Assembly Sofia's
TOTAL WAR SAGA: TROY.

By Fraser Brown

Troy: A Total War Saga

T

otal War is delving into mythology. For the last couple of historical games, myths and legends

have been creeping into the war-torn sandbox, but in *Total War Saga: Troy*, Creative Assembly Sofia is taking things one step further, honing in on a conflict where our best source is an epic poem about petty gods and a giant wooden horse. This isn't *Warhammer*, though, and history hasn't been entirely abandoned.

So there are gods. And mythical heroes. And even a minotaur. The team's drawn on ancient yarns like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, along with other myths, but then squinted at them through the lens of history. Maps and archeology have been used to give cities and armies an air of authenticity, and the minotaur is really a big bloke wearing a bull's head and wielding a massive axe. When he's charging at an army, though, the distinction doesn't matter too much.

"We've got the history and archaeology on the one hand, and we have the characters and the narrative from *The Iliad* to just pour over them," says lead game designer Todor Nikolov. Troy reinterprets a slew of far-fetched legends, but it's grounded

by the historical layer. The familiar *Total War* campaign structure has been similarly preserved.

Just like *The Iliad*, Paris will kidnap Helen, the Spartan queen, and flee back to Troy, but from there little is etched in stone. Things might play out like the poem, and the eight playable factions favour certain paths and have established relationships with other factions, but this is still a sandbox. Instead of Greeks uniting, hopping on their boats and besieging Troy, they might just fight among themselves over territory back home. Playing as one of the Trojan factions, you could stop them before they even reach the formidable city, then take the war west. If you don't mind being labelled a traitor, you can switch sides, even if you're playing as Hector, the Trojan prince. He's meant to protect his father's city, which he can also inherit, but you could decide that he deserves to be a king a little earlier.

The factions will start small and need to use diplomacy, trade and conquest to expand. Playing as Meneleus of Sparta, you won't just be able to gather all of your buddies and sail off to Troy right away. You'll need to

wine and dine the other Greek factions and try to form a confederation, or batter them into submission, before heading east with a massive alliance. And you'll be wanting to bring plenty of heroes with you, as well as an elite army, so that means you'll need to spend time building and planning. You could try to rush off and do it all alone, of course, but Troy is a tough nut to crack. It's essentially *Total War*'s version of a boss battle.

TROY SOLDIERS

"Troy is always this massive, well-defended city," says Nikolov. "You could compare it to Kyoto in *Shogun 2*. It's a faction of its own and held by Priam, the other king. They've got all the forces they need to hold the city for as long as possible, so it takes a considerable amount of effort to conquer it. I can't imagine that it will be possible to actually take the city

RIGHT: I'm not going to be the one to tell him there were no minotaurs in Troy.

BOTTOM: Battles will mostly be between massed infantry, with the occasional man-bull.

"WE HAVE THE CHARACTERS AND THE NARRATIVE FROM THE ILIAD TO JUST POUR OVER THEM"



near the early part of the game. You need a considerable amount of preparation, forces and, preferably, allies to be able to pull that off."

Or you could use a Trojan horse. Unfortunately, you won't be bundling warriors into the belly of a wooden equine, but there will be events and features inspired by it. Some historians have suggested that the Trojan horse is an allegory for earthquakes, which may have been the real reason the city fell. Poseidon, the god of big waves and big quakes, was also the god of horses, so the wooden horse could represent his wrath. These earthquakes will be present in the game and plague the city, softening it up for attack.

"Troy is left in a shambles, buildings are damaged and the garrison is severely depleted," says Nikolov. "If you fight on the battle map for Troy during that period of time, you are going to see wall breaches, which are otherwise not achievable, and general destruction everywhere. They are windows of opportunity that you can use if you want to take the city, so you'll need to pay special attention to them."

Actual horses won't feature that much in *Troy*. The Bronze Age Trojans and Greeks used horses in





war, but largely for transport or as status symbols. Some warriors will get to ride around in chariots, but cavalry is rare. By conquering a specific region that was said to host centaurs, however, players can recruit the legendary creatures, though they're really just regular horsemen, effectively light cavalry, who can be used to pester your enemies before quickly running away. Don't expect epic horse charges that send units flying.

Nikolov says this was one of the biggest challenges the team faced, but one they recognised right at the start when they started exploring the Bronze Age setting. With the absence of horsemen, more attention has been given to infantry units. There's the introduction of new flanking abilities, the ability to switch weapon stances and new terrain types, complete with obstacles. In a demo battle, I watch as one unit gets bogged down in some mud, while another sticks their shields on their backs so they can do more damage with their spears.

FAME GAME

Heroes are *Troy's* heavy hitters. Achilles, Agammemnon, Hector,

HERO ROLL CALL

Get to know some of Troy's legendary brawlers



MINOTAUR

He's really just a guy who is super into scary costumes and axes. He's about as tough as a real minotaur, however, and has a penchant for charging at enemies, knocking them back or into the air.



HECTOR

Hector is Troy's big hero. He's a defensive warrior with tanky units and a dad that he needs to impress, at least if he wants to rule Troy. He eventually gets killed off by Achilles, but maybe not this time.



ACHILLES

Best known for having a dodgy heel, Achilles is the greatest hero of the Greeks and can recruit the largest amount of elite warriors, but he's also hot-blooded, moody and isn't the best diplomat.

Troy: A Total War Saga

» they're all leaders with flashy abilities and even flashier armour. They're showboaters, too, trying to work their way up the heroic rankings. Some of them, like Achilles, take it extra seriously, and he'll start sulking if other heroes are more impressive than him. They like to show off in the middle of battles, challenging each other to fights. Unlike *Three Kingdom's* duels, these challenges lock down enemies for a specific time, after which they can leave the duel with no penalties. And the ability needs to be unlocked first. The heroes are tough enough to take on whole units without breaking a sweat, potentially with some sort of divine artefact won by completing an epic quest and fulfilling their heroic destiny.

"They're quite like the quest chains in *Warhammer*," says Nikolov. "Basically, there are a series of objectives, which culminates in an epic battle. And it's a great tool for us to do some narrative in an otherwise sandbox game. With Odysseus, for example, his quest is actually our modest way to retell *The Odyssey*."

If you're commanding the star of *The Odyssey*, then, you'll get a quest to go off and fight in Troy, then you'll be recalled all the way home to fight off your wife's suitors and show off your sick archery skills. There might be disguises. If you complete the quest chain and reclaim his kingdom, Odysseus will be able to wield a magical bow in battle, and he'll also be accompanied by his son, who serves as a new hero. Typical royals, always with the nepotism.

Unlike heroes, the gods won't be wandering around the map or flinging spears at their enemies, but they play just as significant a role, each representing a different major pillar of the game.

"We must represent the gods because they're essential to the narrative," says Nikolov. "You can't tell the

"THE WHOLE ECONOMIC GAMEPLAY ON THE CAMPAIGN MAP IS GOING TO BE A BIT MORE COMPLEX"

story of the Trojan War without making reference to the gods. There are several movies about the Trojan War, and very few of those ever mention the gods, usually trying to make the story as grounded as possible, but *The Iliad* is

not like that. We've chosen to implement the gods as part of the gameplay system where, based on what you do in the game, different gods tend to like you or dislike you, gaining or losing you favour."

Factions need to suck up to seven gods in the hopes that they'll bring them wealth or skill in battle. Build temples to Ares and slaughter captives after a battle and you'll put a smile on the god of war's face, netting your warriors the reward of being much better at killing. If you need another king to accept a crappy deal or cheer up a gloomy city, however, you're better off making Aphrodite happy.

PLAYING FAVOURITES

The gods are fickle, though, so you can lose favour or even wreck another faction's relationship with their god. One of the ways you can meddle with a faction's favour is by sending in a priest to perform a ritual in the opposition's territory. They're one of three returning agents, which *Troy* is unexpectedly bringing back.

These characters can perform various actions on the campaign map, like slowing down enemies or spying on cities, but they don't appear in battle.

In *Warhammer*, they were replaced by multi-purpose heroes, while *Thrones of Britannia* and *Three Kingdoms*

gave their jobs to leaders. Cutting them out has done wonders for the pace of the game, so I'm uncertain if their return will be a welcome one.

Along with conventional agents like the priest, envoy and spy, you'll be able to recruit epic, one-shot agents. They don't level up or get skill trees, but they also can't fail an action. Once they're used, however, they're gone for good.

They're total game-changers, says Nikolov, but I can already see myself trying to save them up for when I really, really need them, which means I'll definitely never end up using them at all...

There does, generally, seem to be more micro-management. There's no currency in *Troy*, but factions will need a big stash of other resources to keep things running. Food is used for lots of things, including the upkeep of troops, while more advanced units will need bronze for their gear. Wood and eventually stone, meanwhile, are required for constructing and maintaining buildings. Gold is the rarest resource, but it's prized by everyone and is heavily involved in trading. And if you run out of these resources, there will be penalties, from deserting troops to buildings falling down.





FOR GODS' SAKE

Even the gods have jobs



ARES

God of war and slaughter, Ares can make your warriors tough, your enemies weak and murdering people in his name will bring a tear to his eye. But piss him off and he can empower your enemies.



APHRODITE

As the goddess of love, Aphrodite will make sure your population has a spring in their step, but she'll also lend a divine hand when it comes to diplomacy, making chatting to other leaders a bit breezier.



HERA

As top goddess, Hera is in charge of a lot, including economic progress, production and unit replenishment. Get her favour and your armies will bounce back quickly after battle.



POSEIDON

Poseidon loves sea monsters and horses, but the damp deity is more ambivalent about humans. He's got a beef with the Trojans because he was forced by Zeus to build their very thick walls.

GOING FOR BROKE

"It basically means that you can go bankrupt in more than one way," says Nikolov. "You need to keep all these things in mind. Sometimes you might even be fine to just endure several turns of food bankruptcy, because a certain situation demands it, but it's a lot more to take care of, and the whole economic gameplay on the campaign map is going to be a bit more complex."

Troy introduces more types of specialised minor settlements that you'll want to conquer and upgrade to fill your stores, and you'll need to be quick about it. Some resources can be depleted, so you have to be the first to exploit the resource to get every last drop. The competition over minor settlements is probably going to be pretty fierce in the early game, but there are also some other ways to meet your war machine's production needs, including trading with other factions, trading with ships that have come from more distant lands and good old fashioned raiding.

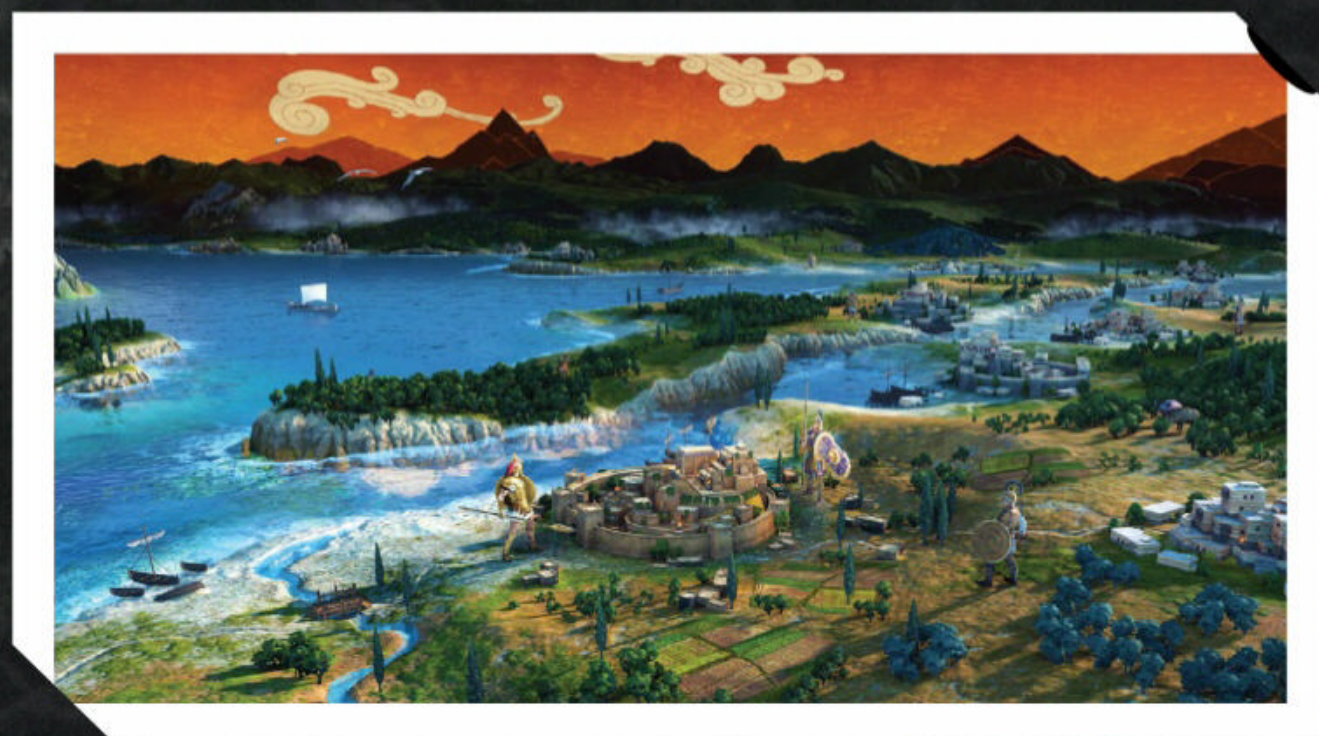
The campaign map itself is definitely in the running for *Total War's* most striking warzone. It's around the size of *Rome 2*, though the scale is smaller, dominated by the Aegean Sea in its centre. Despite the

ABOVE: Achilles's secret weapon is his blindingly shiny golden armour.

BELOW: Why worry about sieges when you can stare at Troy's illustrated skyboxes?

prevalence of the sea, ship combat doesn't really fit with the setting – and has never been great – so you won't be duking it out on boats. The colours are more vivid, the ocean is brighter and it generally has the look of a fantasy map, especially when you hover over imposing Mount Olympus. Even the skybox is a treat, with illustrations of clouds and mountains designed to look like classical Greek pottery.

Total War Sagas focus on historical flashpoints, but they also seem like a good place for Creative Assembly to experiment and try out new ideas. Getting rid of cavalry is a pretty bold move, and one I don't think we'd see outside of these spin-offs. So, while the Trojan War isn't really historical, it's the source of some intriguing tweaks to the *Total War* formula and great fodder for a game that's about truly epic battle. ■



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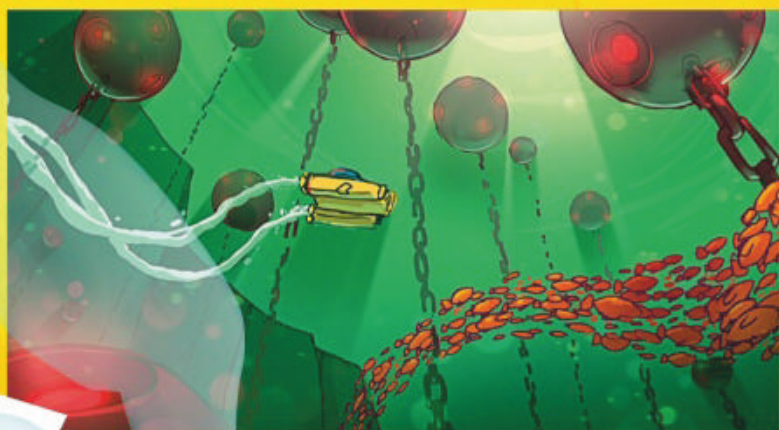




MOTION

DEAD CELLS studio Motion Twin is taking a unique approach to its next project.

By Tom Senior



hat's next?' For an independent studio riding high after a big hit it's an exciting question, and a daunting one. After the success of its excellent action roguelike *Dead Cells*, Motion Twin is in the process of deciding what to do next. In a normal studio the higher-ups would get together, make a decision, and then tell the rest of the studio what to make. Motion Twin is different. Visit their website and you'll see the message "NO BOSS" proudly displayed on the front page. No-one at Motion Twin has a job title, and everyone has an equal share in the company.

That's great for staff members who get to take home a share of *Dead Cells'* success, but it comes with unusual challenges, especially when the studio needs to make a big decision about its future. When I arrive at the Bordeaux studio a small team has been generating prototypes for four months. One programmer is working on a *Sekiro*-inspired third-person combat system. Another leads me through a slideshow of gorgeous concept art, explaining how the prototyping process works.

It's fluid, and ruthless. A designer might inspire an artist to create some concept pieces, and the concept pieces influence the designer's idea of what the game might be. The moment the idea runs into major problems, it's killed. The best bits are pillaged, and might make their way into future prototypes. At some point, organically, the team hopes to arrive at an idea that everyone believes in.

TWIN STUDIOS

The prototyping team is small, and made up of Motion Twin veterans. The rest of the team consists of newer staff members, and they work on upcoming updates for *Dead Cells*. In a flat business structure it's difficult keep team members focused on separate projects. Motion Twin does this by existing, technically, as two businesses. The *Dead Cells* division is called Evil Empire.

"On a daily basis, it's like we are just working together every day," says Motion Twin vet Sébastien Bénard.

"But we decided to make a different company to manage everything which is *Dead Cells* related, just to make sure that we can actually be part of the team which is focused on making new things without any interference."

The two teams sit side by side in a small open plan office, and move around regularly to show each other work. Evil Empire generates ideas for new *Dead Cells* updates, but these ideas are still approved by former *Dead Cells* developers at Motion Twin. It shows that even in a 'no boss' environment, there are hierarchies, they're just less visible than they would be in a conventional studio. The advantages are clear, however. Team members freely offer feedback on prototypes and concept pieces. Artists are free to make game design suggestions. The designer might disagree, or incorporate the feedback in future builds.

The structure challenges the idea that employees in creative industries must specialise in just one discipline

and stay shut out of others. A programmer needn't just be a programmer, even if that's their main day-to-day role. Of course this only works if the team isn't too large. Scaling up is a significant challenge for Motion Twin. Every new hire introduces a new voice and potentially affects the cut that everyone takes home from a project. There are practical office considerations too. Everyone needs to be able to move around and talk freely without disrupting each other.

FLAT PACK

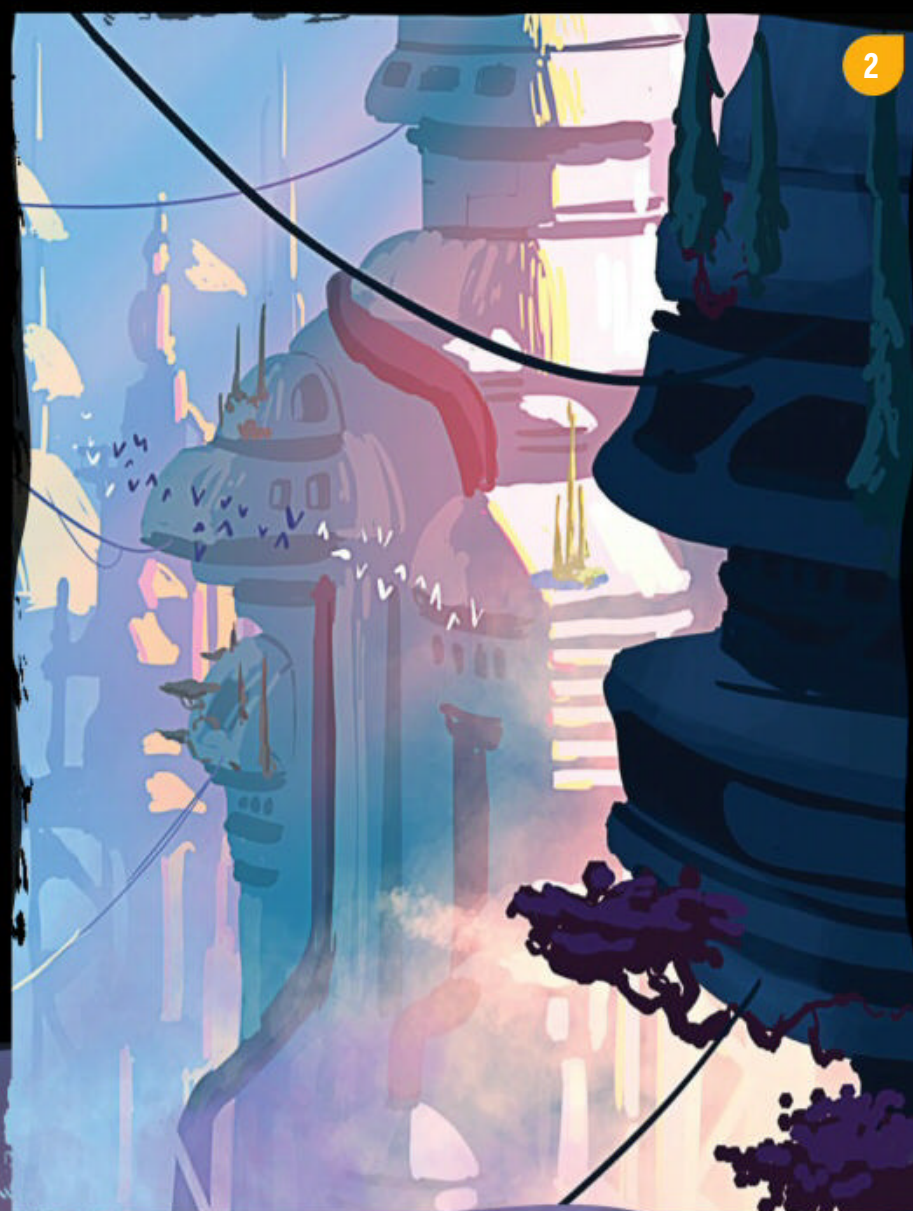
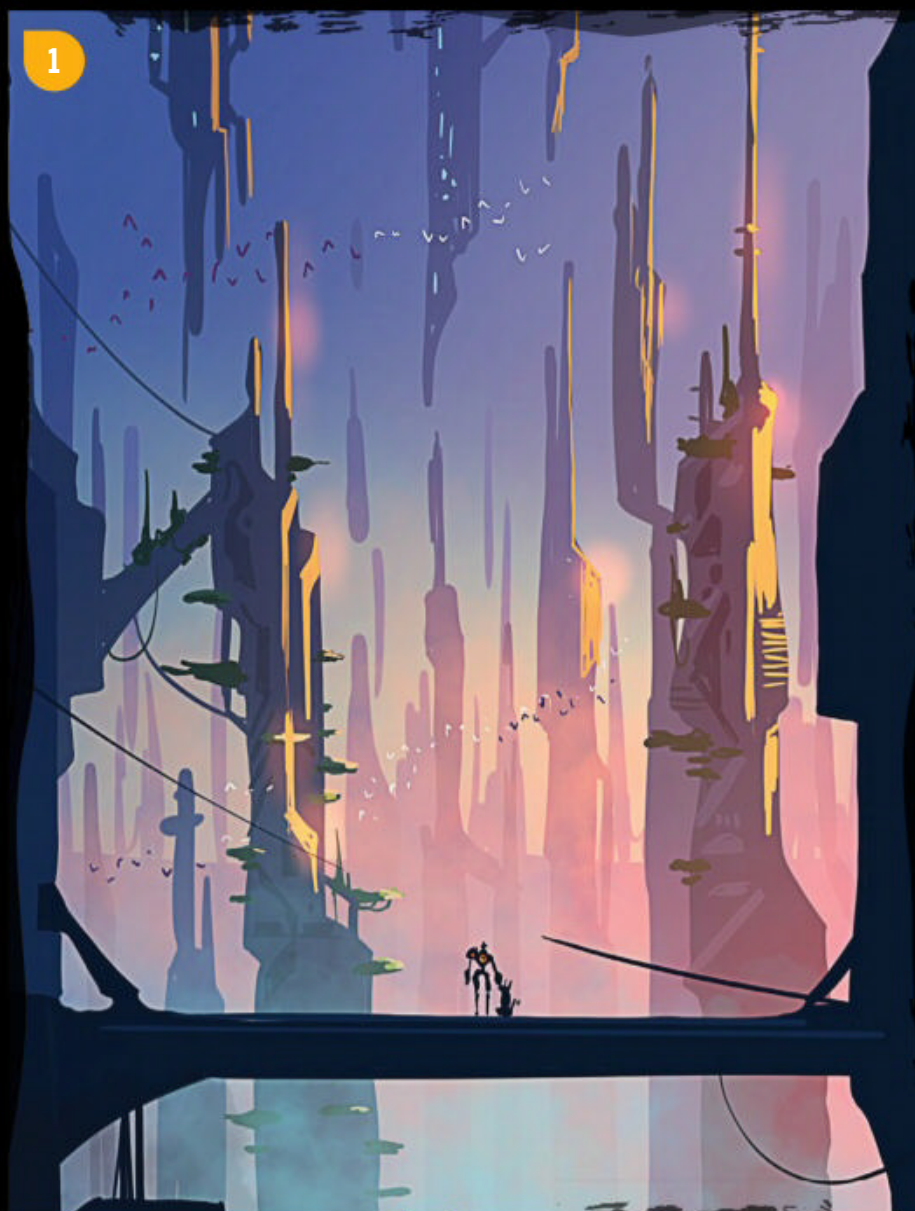
PC Gamer has visited hundreds of studios all over the world, but this one is not quite like any other. Motion Twin and Evil Empire has an informal structure like Valve, but with a profit share system rather than a peer-reviewed pay system. The team is small and great at generating ideas, but there's an underlying pragmatism to the prototyping process. The team are also testing engines, workshopping creative processes to answer essential questions like 'how long does it take to create an attack animation' – this is the gritty organisational work that underpins game development.

Over the next few pages we'll move through some of Motion Twin's beautiful concept art. The team's keen to stress that its next title probably won't look like this – it's all experimentation. But, when its follow-up does come out, return to these pics, and maybe you'll see the shadow of an idea that survived and found its way to the finished game. ■

FAR LEFT: The studio's in a prototyping frenzy as it searches for a killer idea for its next game.

LEFT: This underwater adventure is one such concept – the player explores the depths in a yellow submarine.

“WE DECIDED TO MAKE A DIFFERENT COMPANY TO MANAGE EVERYTHING WHICH IS DEAD CELLS RELATED”



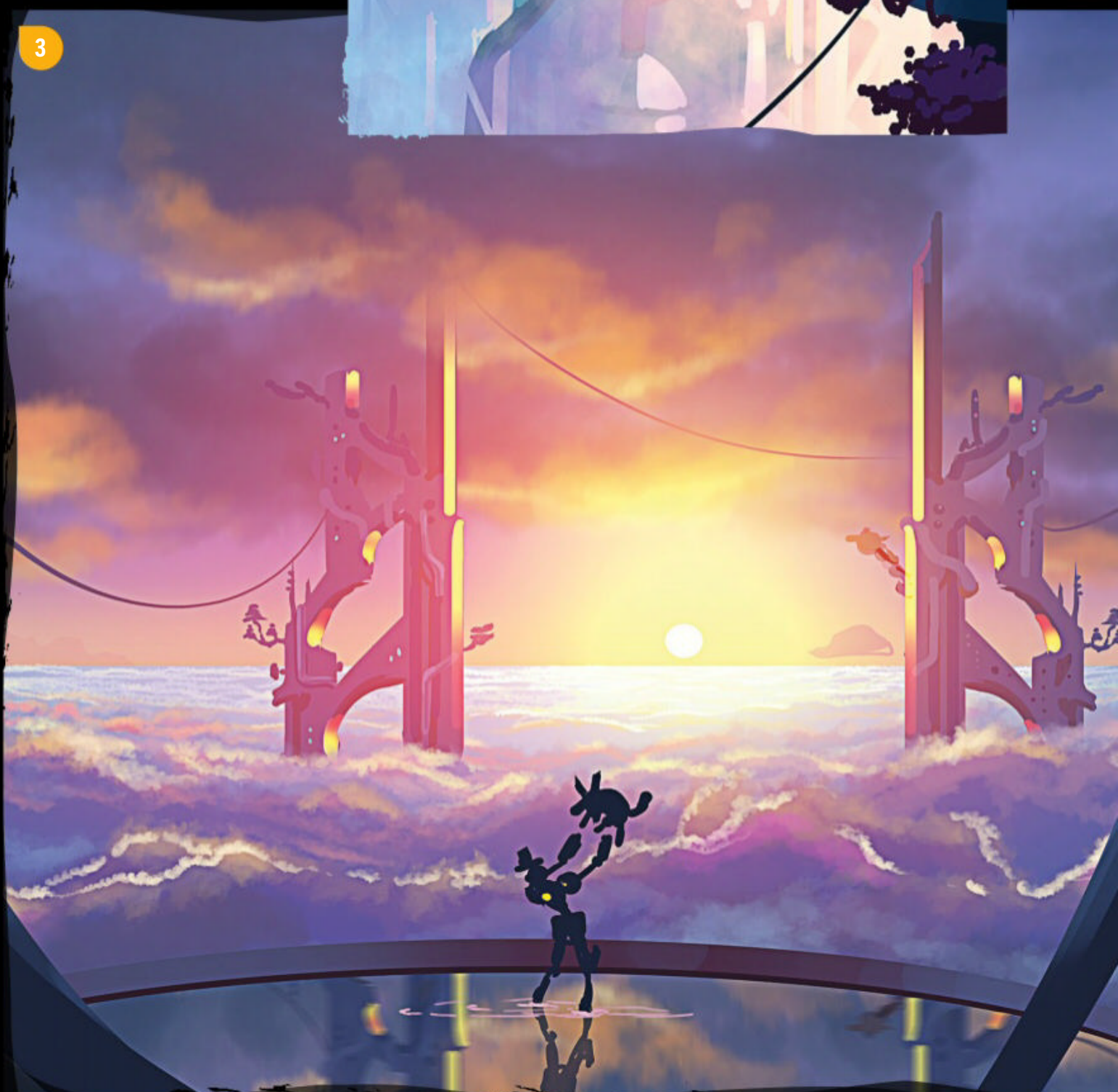
YOUR NEW BEST FRIEND

The devs explore the idea of playing with an AI buddy

1 Many of these early concepts show a friendship between a robot and his loyal dog, which was going to be a central mechanic in early prototypes.

2 Motion Twin works in bright colour palettes. Partly because they're gorgeous, but also because the artists enjoy working with exciting colours every day.

3 At one point the game could have been set on a series of floating islands. This eventually gave way to a prototype where you play as a plane rather than a robot.





LINKED SOULS

The companionship idea morphs as the team consider a new sci-fi setting

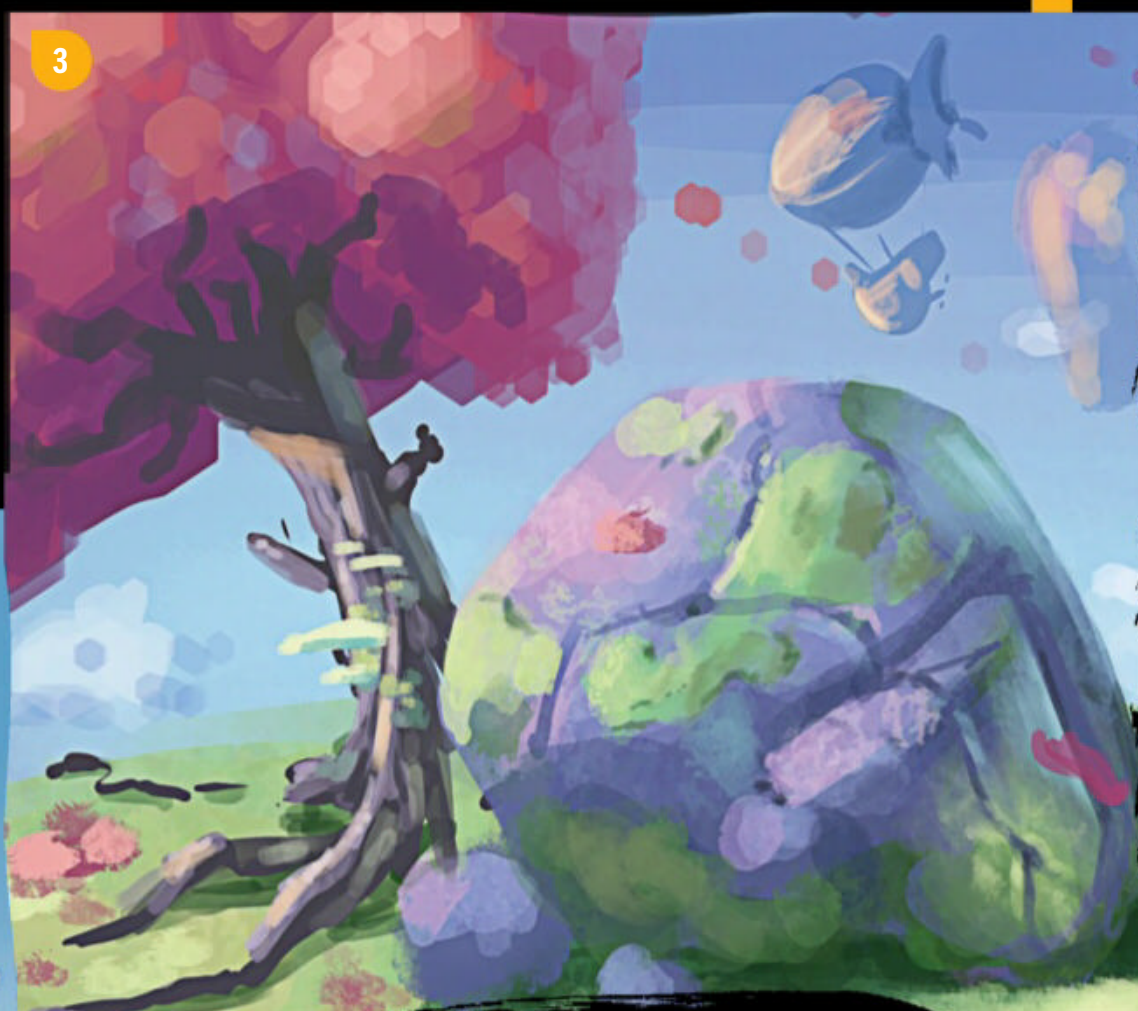
1 Motion Twin is keen to do something different to *Dead Cells*' dark fantasy setting. The future provides a good break.

2 Instead of a dog, your wellbeing is tied to a companion in a shifted dimension. But the team reckon that it would be very difficult to create a meaningful bond between player and partner.



2

THE ARTISTS ENJOY WORKING WITH
EXCITING COLOURS EVERY DAY



TO THE SKIES

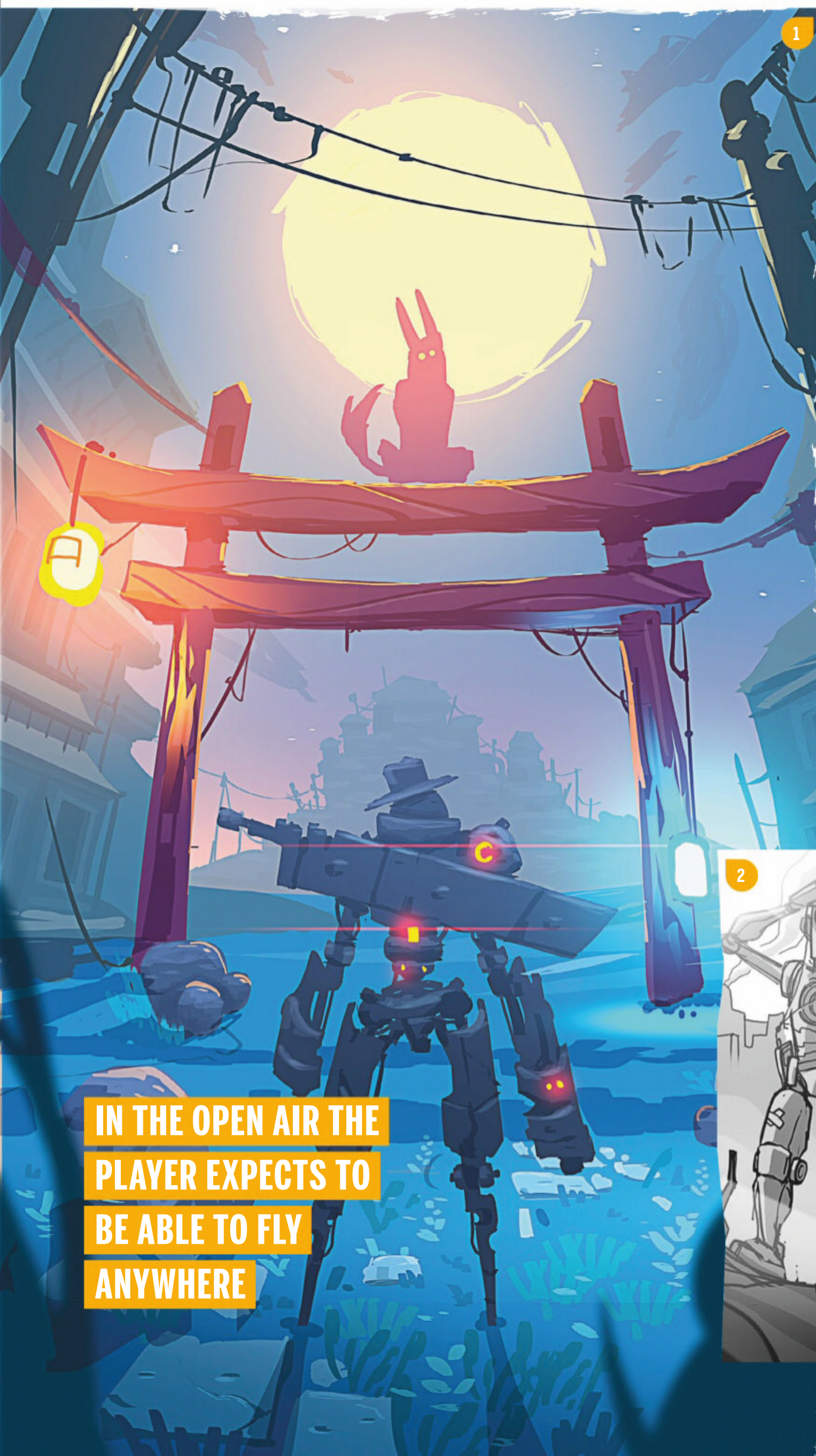
The friendship idea gives way to open freedom

1 This image retains the idea of a humanoid playable character who can hop onto vessels to move between islands.

2 But what if you played as the plane instead? Here we see an obstacle that might appear in the open sky levels for you to fly through.

3 Motion Twin created a playable version of the plane game and found the level design process particularly difficult.

4 In the open air the player expects to be able to fly anywhere, and invisible walls feel too restrictive and unfair.

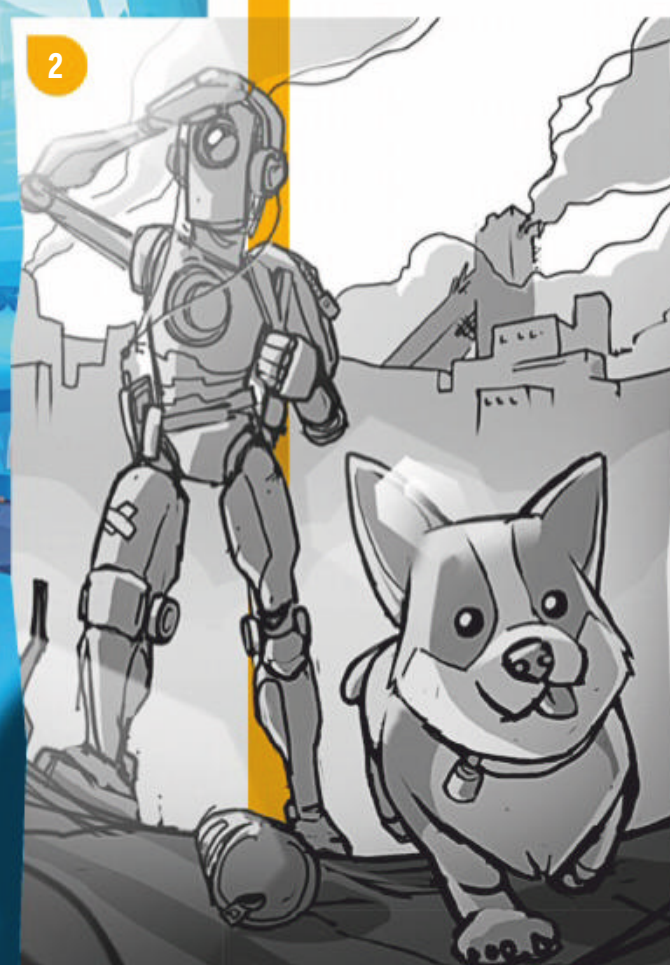


CONTRASTING CONCEPTS

MT's artists bring different personalities to each idea

1 Thomas Vasseur was the art director on *Dead Cells*. He brings a powerful colour palette and Japanese forms to the 'robot and his dog' concept.

2 Gwenaël Massé imagines a post-apocalypse not too distant from Bethesda's *Fallout* series. Importantly, he also brings a very good corgi.



IN THE OPEN AIR THE
PLAYER EXPECTS TO
BE ABLE TO FLY
ANYWHERE



SAVED

Japanese PC games of the '80s and '90s have a rich history, little-known in the west. **THE GAME PRESERVATION SOCIETY** is working to make sure they don't disappear forever.

GAMES

By Wes Fenlon

The Game Preservation Society



It's late afternoon in Tokyo, and in the narrow three-story home that serves as the headquarters of the Game Preservation Society, I've just learned about *Jesus*. In the west, when we talk about videogame developer Enix, we're probably talking about *Dragon Quest*, which inspired an explosion of console JRPGs in the '90s. Joseph Redon would much rather talk about a PC game like *Jesus*, which was made by Enix around the same time as the first *Dragon Quest*, back in 1987.

Like most of the thousands of games in Redon's collection, I've never heard of *Jesus* until he shows it to me. The mission of the Game Preservation Society, the non-profit he co-founded, is to collect, archive, and protect Japan's PC games, most of them made in the '80s and '90s before consoles took over and doomed them to obscurity. Any game I point to he can tell a story about, casually dishing out some of the history of who made it and why it's special.

He loves every second of it. When he begins to talk about Enix, he slips into the role of a storyteller born into an oral tradition, passing down a lifetime of knowledge that could only be accumulated in Japan. Off the island, Japan's PC games are all but completely unknown. The Game Preservation Society exists to make sure they aren't forgotten.

ENIX: THE PUBLISHING PIONEERS

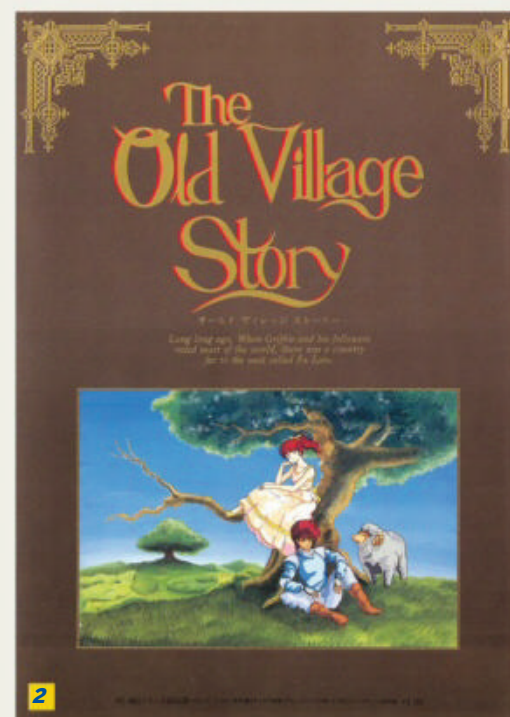
"Enix is a very great publisher, but this is not the history everyone knows," Redon tells me as we flip through the covers of '80s RPGs and adventure games in a protective binder. Cover after cover is pure imagination fuel, evoking a breathless "I need to play this". In those days, great art and magazines were the best tools for selling games.

"When you sell 50,000 copies, you're rich," he says. That's how it was for PC developers in the mid-1980s – small teams or even individuals making games for an audience eager to use their shiny new computers, before Nintendo's Famicom took over.

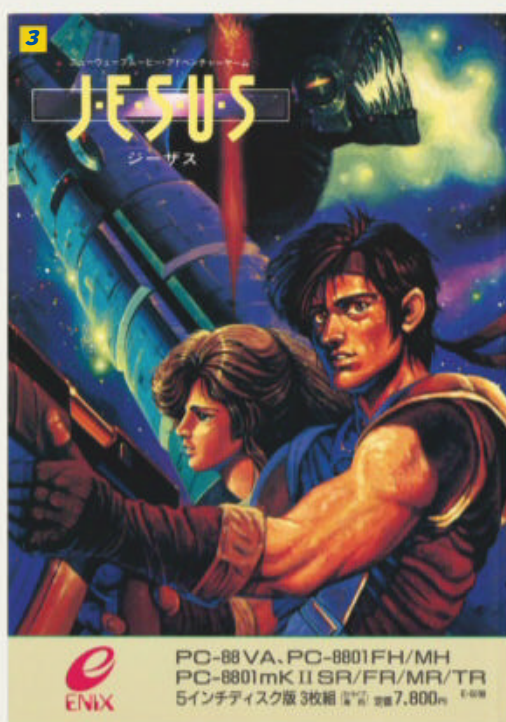
In 2019, the common wisdom is that few Japanese gamers play on PCs. But you have to remember in the '80s, Japan was riding high on an economic boom. Japanese technology was the hottest shit on Earth, and personal computers – specifically the NEC PC-8801 released in 1981 – were selling gangbusters.

"Most houses were rich in the '80s in Japan, in the bubble," Redon says. "Buying new stuff every year. Let's buy a PC, a new car, a new TV." Enthusiast mags popped up for PCs and games, which were typically made in months on tiny budgets.

Enix started as a publisher, and decided to round up talent by offering a 1 million yen prize to hobbyist programmers who submitted quality games. Out of hundreds of entries Enix picked the best to release on the PC-88 and competing PCs, quickly gaining a reputation for quality. Enix's collective included the creators of



"ENIX IS A VERY GREAT PUBLISHER, BUT THIS IS NOT THE HISTORY EVERYONE KNOWS"



1 Game Arts made its name with shoot 'em ups, but *Zeliard* was its first step towards being an RPG house.

2 A quaint adventure game from Enix, post-*Dragon Quest*.

3 I always knew *Jesus* would make it to space someday.

4 The Bible's not the only place where *Jesus* got a second round.



Dragon Quest, which was a smash hit. *Dragon Quest 2* was even bigger, selling millions, when most successful PC games sold only tens of thousands of copies. And this is where Enix's PC history really gets interesting.

"Do you think they will invest time and money to make any more PC games that will sell only 10,000 copies?" Redon asks. "The games could even cost as much as a *Dragon Quest* [to make]."

"Even more, because it's PC. No limits in memory – just increase the number of floppy disks. You have to make a gorgeous package. A 100 page manual. Advertise in many magazines. Why would you do it?"

Many other PC developers abandoned ship for the more lucrative Famicom. But Enix was different. "It's a publishing company, but it's a collective of game creators. They don't dream about Famicom. They dream about making games. They dream about high quality graphics."



MEET THE VHD

The biggest damn floppy you ever did see

The VHD, or Video High Density, is actually a vinyl disc inside a plastic shell. It could hold an hour of video and was a competitor to the LaserDisc, read by a stylus instead of a laser. "There is only one big issue with the VHD. Like VHS, every time you watch it, the quality degrades. But when you have a brand new VHD, you have the highest quality possible at that time," Redon says.

Dragon's Lair used a LaserDisc for its video, and in Japan some games used the VHD for the same thing. You'd need a VHD player for the MSX or Sharp X1 PC, but that disk only housed the video. The program would live on a tape that also came in the box, but some games housed their program within the VHD as noise, which would be read in the same way as a cassette.



About making digital music. About making always bigger games. Huge stories. They make entertainment, not money. So they tell Enix 'We want to make games for the PC. This is the platform we think is the best for making the games we want to make'.

"And some developers, some publishing company investors, say no, it takes too much time. But Enix says 'Okay, do it. Even if we don't make a lot of money, OK. From the beginning we're here to follow the creators, help them to market their dreams'."

Maybe that's a romanticised history. But Enix did keep releasing PC games through 1993, including one Redon highlights, *Misty Blue*, in 1990, and the wonderfully named *Jesus II* in 1991. I've tried to imagine how my child self would've reacted to a Japanese game called *Jesus II* on a shelf, but the boldness and mystery of it probably would have shattered my mind.

The Game Preservation Society

✪ *Jesus*, you may be surprised to learn, is an orbital space laboratory where the adventure game is set. It's more or less a playable manga about an Alien-esque xenomorph loose in the station. Like many of the PC games of the era, *Jesus* is a text-heavy adventure, largely made up of static images and loads of dialogue.

"You have to understand that PC-88 is not made for gaming," Redon says. The computer didn't have hardware to support sprites or even scrolling, but developers worked within those limitations to make games that took advantage of the PC's strengths: high resolution monitors, storage space, and, starting with the 1985 model PC-88 MkII SR, a Yamaha sound chip that could do FM synthesis. It was the predecessor to the Sega Genesis/Mega Drive's famous chip, and gave musicians the power to write music that still sounds fantastic in 2019.

Misty Blue is the perfect example. It's a mystery starring a young musician trying to clear himself of a murder, with a banger of a concert intro. "At that time, it was the most advanced graphical game you could find,"

Redon says. Again it's essentially a digital comic, more stills than animations, but the pixel art is almost TV anime caliber. And that music. A year before he did *Streets of Rage*, Yuzo Koshiro was channeling '80s eurobeat pop into lively chiptune.

Enix's list of '80s PC games goes on and on, unknown in the west. Enix published the first videogame adaptation of *Fist of the North Star*, the famously ultraviolent, post-apocalyptic battle manga (you may know it from the "You are already dead" meme). There's *EVO: Search For Eden*, which actually was released in North America. Except that was the Super Nintendo version, a platformer, while the original is an RPG.

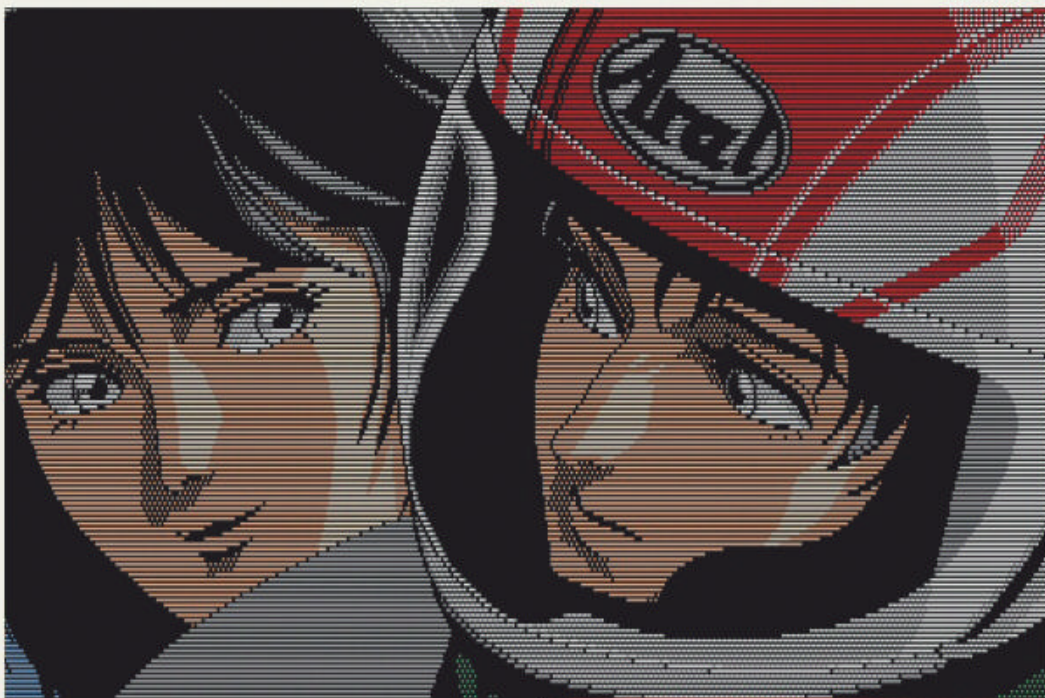
"For me, it's like a small bubble in PC history, where we're not here to make money," Redon says.

GAME ARTS: THE TECH WIZARDS

While Enix released RPG and adventure after RPG and adventure, a small developer named Game Arts was doing things with PCs no one thought possible. They were making shooting games, and they were good.

"They knew how to use the hardware, to push the limits," says Redon. Their first game was 1985's *Thexder*, a 2D platformer where you control a robot (which, of course, transforms into a jet) and fire a laser beam that undoubtedly blew the minds of kids used to slow-paced visual novels. Its follow-up, *Silpheed*, is even better (though it's hard as hell).

At the time, most developers were releasing new games every few months. *Silpheed* was hyped up in



PRESERVE THE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

Donations welcome

Redon and a small group founded the non-profit in 2011, and most of the money spent to acquire and archive the games comes from its members. Each game component is carefully stored separately. Glossy paper covers are flattened in protective portfolios. Manuals and disks are stored separately, in special envelopes that won't damage the paper. It's all meticulously catalogued in a temperature-controlled archive, with a digital database full of information on every game.

Most of that information isn't available online, yet, but a public database is in the works. Visit GamePres.org for more.



magazines, but it took a long time to finish. “People thought it would never come out and that for Game Arts, it’s over,” Redon says. “You have people to feed, a company to run. You don’t put all your eggs in one basket and wait more than one year for a single title. But the game came out. And they wanted it to be perfect. So it was worth it.” *Silpheed* is, notably, the first game to feature a digitised Japanese voice.

After *Silpheed* Game Arts made *Zeliard*, a platformer that actually came west for MS-DOS. Soon after Game Arts would transition to consoles and RPGs, with now-classics like *Lunar* and *Grandia*. But they left a mark on the PC in just a few short years. Game Arts even made a mahjong game that Redon holds up as a rarity from its era with genuinely good AI.

“There’s no crappy game from Game Arts. It’s a team, from the beginning, of people who want to make great games. They know what they want, and what is a good game. So I think they helped to really increase the quality of games on PC, and it’s really a challenge to release a shooting game on a PC [at that time].”

SQUARE: THE HUNGRY NEW KIDS

Today Square and Enix are united, but before *Final Fantasy*, Square was a far humbler company. In the beginning, like Enix and Game Arts, Square was all about the PC.

Its very first game was called *The Death Trap*, a silent 1984 text parser adventure with rudimentary art. “There is one very interesting thing about *Death Trap*. Until then, all adventure games in Japan, you had to type the commands in English,” Redon says. “*Death Trap* was the very first one in Japan where you can not only enter your actions in Japanese, but also in English.” And why were they English in the first place? “Because they were copying Apple II games,” he quips.

1986’s *Alpha* is notable for being an ‘eroge’ or erotic adventure game from Square, but *Cruise Chaser Blassty*, released the same year, has more going for it. It’s one of the first game designed by *Final Fantasy* creator Hironobu Sakaguchi, with Nobuo Uematu’s first game music. And it’s a super cool mech sim

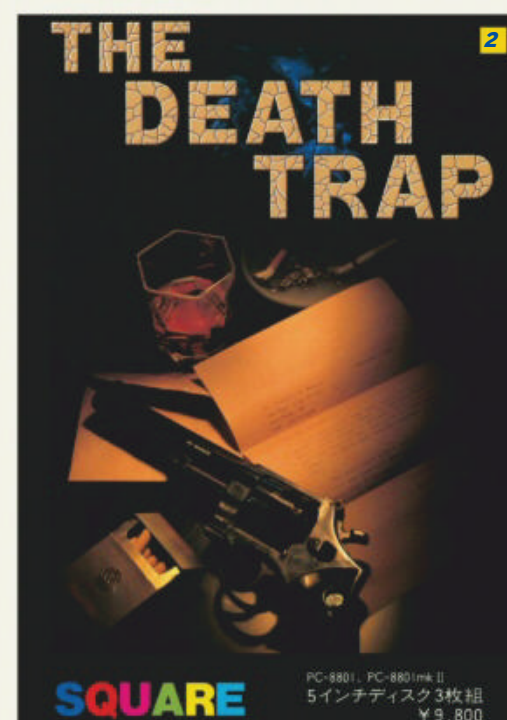
Where Enix released excellent games throughout its entire PC life, Square was a humble developer until its big break with *Final Fantasy*.

None of its PC games were big hits or left a lasting impression. But they do offer some insight into the truth behind the legend that *Final Fantasy*’s name came from Square’s last-ditch effort to stay alive. Redon doesn’t know if that’s true, but he does have a theory.

“What you have to understand is that making a Famicom game – you needed to put cash on the table to get the licence. It was 500 million yen. Huge. So if they had decided not to release a Famicom game, they’re okay. But they couldn’t fail. That’s different. They were clearly looking for a smash product.”

THE REST IS HISTORY

Seeing just a fraction of the games Redon has dedicated his adult life to preserving is a bit like opening Pandora’s



“WE ARE NOT ONLY INTO PC GAMES, WE’RE INTO THE PRESERVATION OF GAMES”



1 *Misty Blue* looked and sounded phenomenal in its day.

2 In its early PC days, Square just couldn’t land itself a big hit.

3 This adventure game has as much to do with *Casablanca* as *Jesus* has to do with *Jesus*.

4 Dragons were everywhere in the ‘80s, turns out.

box. I know, now, how many games I will never have the time or Japanese proficiency to play. It’s also scary how perilous their survival is.

There’s simply less interest and nostalgia for them. And when 50,000 sales is a major success, you can guess how few copies of some of these games survive.

“We are going where no one is going,” Redon says. “We are not only into PC games, we’re into the preservation of games. Everything. But there are priorities.

“And the priority is stuff which is decaying very fast, stuff in which people have no interest, and stuff which is difficult to preserve.”

In other words, saving Japan’s retro PC games, before they’re forgotten by history or succumb to the bit rot that will eventually consume every disk, tape, and CD on Earth. It’s far from an easy job, but it’s wonderful that someone is doing it. ■

TIME TO STEP OFF THAT TREADMILL

With so many demands from work, home and family, there never seem to be enough hours in the day for you. Why not press pause once in a while, curl up with your favourite magazine and put a little oasis of 'you' in your day.



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SUPERNOVA



expertreviews
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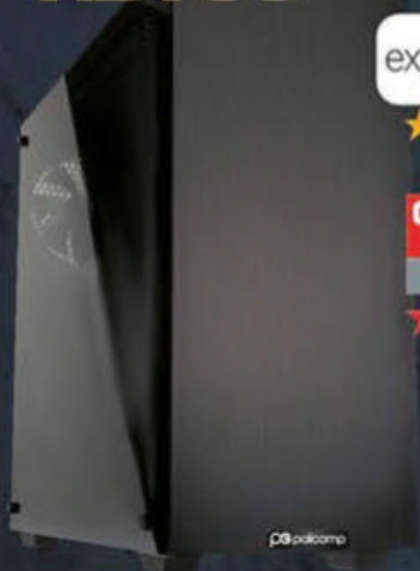
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REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Embracing the odd

In this risk-averse industry of endless sequels and careful iteration, we should always celebrate a bit of unashamed weirdness. It's a delight for my first issue to include reviews of experiences as adventurous as guiding the evolution of man, dungeon crawling as a living six-sided die, and exploring a government bureau built in another dimension. Together they're almost as bizarre as having to review original *World of Warcraft* again.

Not all of the bold experiments evaluated over the following pages are successful, but a title doesn't always have to be to leave a lasting impression. Each of these rebellious mutants will, in its own way, stick with its reviewer for years to come – what more precious trait could we ask for in a game than that?

ROBIN VALENTINE
MANAGING EDITOR

robin.valentine@futurenet.com

**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's bureau directors...



JAMES DAVENPORT
Specialist in
Arcane bureaucracy
Currently playing
Control, Man of Medan
This month
Came to know the unknowable, and also got some teens killed.



CHRIS LIVINGSTON
Specialist in
Bashing rocks together
Currently playing
Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey
This month
Evolved as a games reviewer.



PHIL IWANIUK
Specialist in
Playing the odds, and playing the odd
Currently playing
Dicey Dungeons
This month
Rolled the dice on reviewing yet another roguelike.



ANDY KELLY
Specialist in
Spotting untruths
Currently playing
Telling Lies
This month
Exposed the team's darkest secrets. Is now banned from our video meetings.



STEVEN MESSNER
Specialist in
MMO nostalgia
Currently playing
World of Warcraft Classic
This month
Got the prescription changed on his rose-tinted spectacles.



TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Dodging projectiles
Currently playing
Guardian Sphere
This month
Exchanged health for upgrades by giving blood and getting a free lollipop.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Mall combat
Currently playing
Dead Rising
This month
Bit a number of staff, who died and then rose as polite, tea-loving giants.

MAX BRAIN

CONTROL is Remedy's most bizarre and possibly best game yet. *By James Davenport*

The omnipotent Finnish janitor of the Federal Bureau of Control really wants to go on vacation, but can't until I've vanquished his old nemesis, The Clog. In what we'll call the 'bottom' of The Oldest House, an impossible building in the middle of New York that's infinitely larger on the inside than the outside, The Clog takes up residence near the coolant pumps, a swirling mass of brown slop that moans like a T-Rex roaring bubbles into a glass of milk.

I shoot the wriggling tendrils peeking out of the body and the shit monster disappears down the drain to the tune of a toilet flushing. It's never explained, but I like it that way. It helps keep the mystery alive.

Control is an acrobatic third-person shooter set in an amorphous concrete dimension infested by the sanitised office culture of a 1960s-era government

bureaucracy. Aside from a poo beast, you'll discover new powers and revisit areas of The Oldest House to find upgrades, secrets, and side missions, throwing bullets and random objects at bad guys in Remedy's best combat system yet.

The studio's taking a harder thwack at weird fiction than ever before. Despite a few weak characters and plot threads, it's a success. In *Control*, every conspiracy theory, ghost encounter, and alien abduction happened, just not quite for the reasons you'd expect. It's a collection of stories about seeing through the

banality of everyday life, a story about language, mass media, and statecraft delivered with a dry sense of humour and no tether to reason.

I still don't understand it. But I don't need to. God bless this mess.

A fridge levels buildings unless someone looks at it 24/7

INEXPLICABLE

Jesse Faden shows up to the The Oldest House with mysterious motives, suddenly thrust into the role of director of the FBC. An

Object of Power, a gun called the Service Weapon, chooses her, granting her the ability to wield the weapon and traverse The Oldest House without worry that The Hiss, another unexplainable entity that's invaded the FBC and has been turning its employees into glowing red monsters, will infect her mind. *Control's* a doozy.

I spent most of the first hours reeling with confusion, writing down acronyms and pausing to let moments sink in before moving on. *Control's* narrative is outright inaccessible at first, but that's exactly

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A third-person shooter set in a paranormal funhouse

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Remedy Entertainment

PUBLISHER
505 Games

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080, i9-9900k, 32 GB RAM, SSD

MULTIPLAYER
None
LINK
www.controlgame.com

what Remedy is going for. I still don't know what The Hiss are, why the Service Weapon chose Jesse, why everyone's cool with taking orders from a transdimensional 'Board' that speaks in mumbles emanating from an inverted triangle and whose speech translates into multiple, parallel sentences at once. It/They are/is confusing/unknowable and that's OK/acceptable/true.

Inanimate objects are imbued with godlike powers, the product of Altered World Events or strange phenomena that make up modern American folklore. The FBC visits these places and collects these objects for study in The Oldest House, the panopticon and petri dish they call home.

A floppy disk hurls debris and office supplies at my head. A fridge levels buildings unless someone looks at it 24/7. I accidentally let a rubber duck loose that harasses me, barking like a demonic dog from the corner of every room I enter, flitting away the moment I approach. *Control* is littered with mundane objects made fascinating and sinister, treating Jungian ideas of the collective subconscious and a touch of Baudrillard's hyperreality as the foundation for its paranormal logic. Folklore and language are the literal authors of truth. Finally, mainstream sci-fi that isn't spaceships and militarism and hot green men.

Jesse's story is similarly cryptic and weird, but compromised by a vapid personality and weak connections to the supporting cast. She's harbouring her own mystery, but her sheepish concealments keep her at a distance while her commentary too often mirrors my own. What the hell is happening, did that stapler talk to me, ad infinitum.

We're both baffled by the logic and hidden truths of the FBC and Oldest House, but those moments aren't used to give Jesse a chance to reveal who she is. Her personality never quite coalesces, though the manifold mysteries of the FBC told

THE SERVICE WEAPON'S MANY FORMS

Weapon types and behaviours explained



GRIP
Type: Pistol
Your standard, dependable sidearm.



SHATTER
Type: Shotgun
Devastating at close range, with a wide blast.



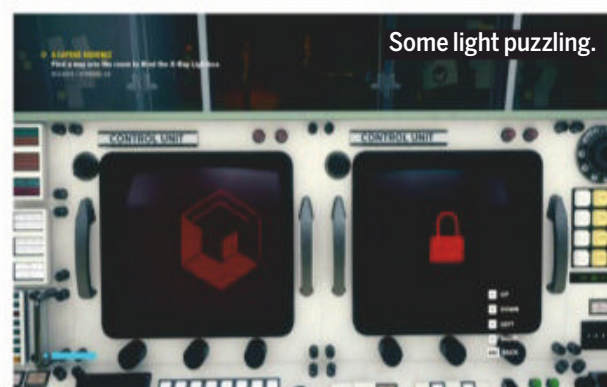
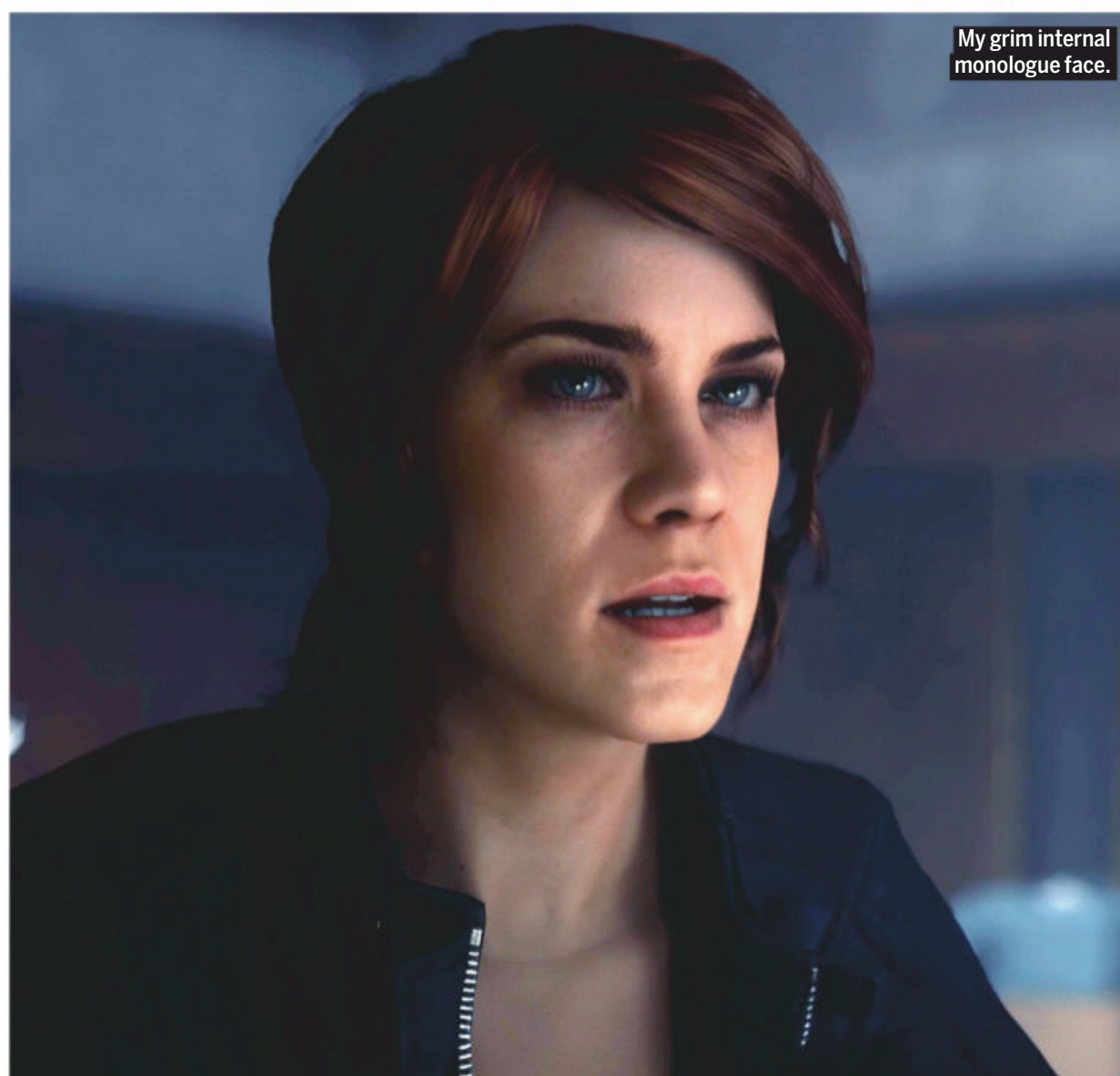
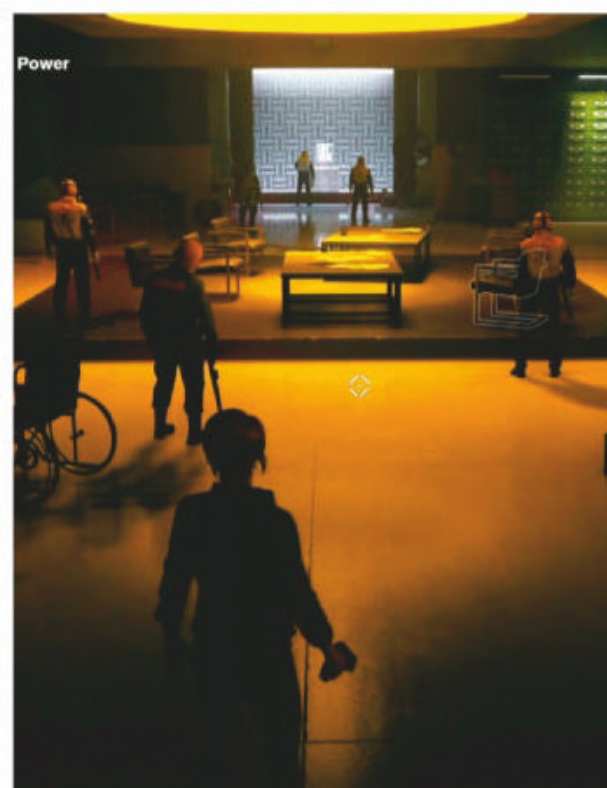
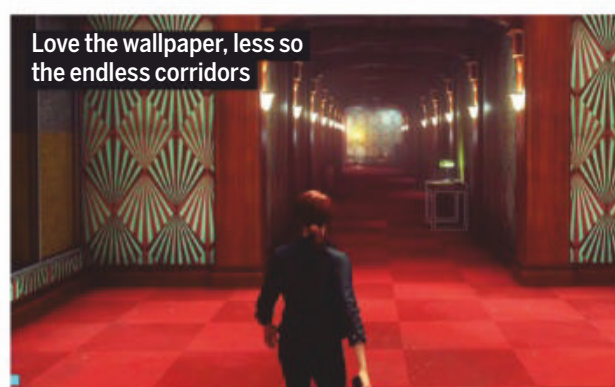
CHARGE
Type: Grenade launcher
Blasts groups to little pieces.

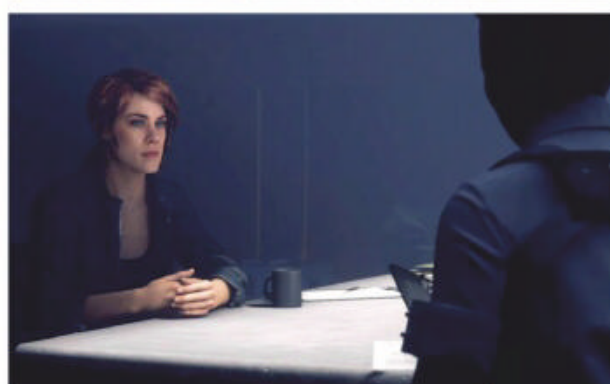
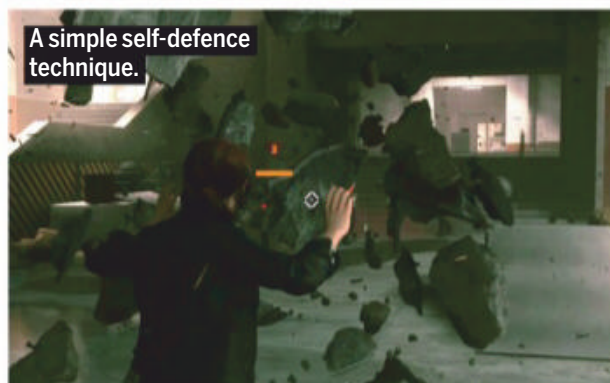
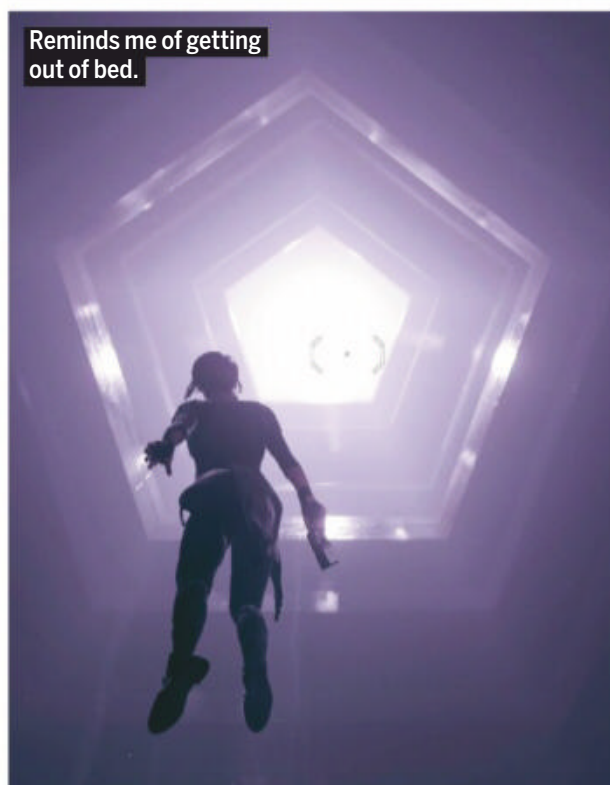


SPIN
Type: SMG
A great raw damage dealer, but runs out of juice fast.



PIERCE
Type: Sniper
Shots are slow, but slice through armour with ease.





» through confidential documents, audio logs, and FMVs do well to buoy the lack of character.

A lightswitch in a Butte, Montana bungalow teleports the user to an oceanside hotel somewhere in time and space, a sort of dimensional transit station. Altered Item case files tell stories about a picnic basket that attracts woodland creatures or a surfboard that gives anyone touching it an excess of confidence. Then there's a creepy puppet TV show the bleach-brained FBC put together to introduce kids to their research, replete with lingering gazes at the camera and sinister voicework. It's horrible! I love it.

It's a fascinating setting, but Jesse's family story about shared trauma and the effects of living in a media-driven world doesn't say much beyond how disorienting it is.

THE LAZY GUN

Control is best when it uses these heady concepts about language and reality as the basis for a set of wild stories. But it ends – after a wild head trip, of course – a little too abruptly, like it had just teed up those big ideas but forgot to swing. The arc doesn't feel complete or entirely fulfilling, as much fun as the ride is, though it's clearly setting up for a sequel, spinoff, or DLC somewhere in the Remedy-verse. Bring it on.

OK, so why is a coral reef growing out of the wall in the maintenance sector, and why does Jesse think it smells delicious? I don't know if I'm meant to reach the high ledge where I see the ocean floor

growing quite yet, but I try anyway. I round the corner and clamber up some rocks where I chain Jesse's dash ability through the air and back around the corner, where I manage to hit the wall below the ledge at just the right point. She grabs it and pulls herself up. I find enemies too powerful for my low-grade abilities and guns, so I dip out. But now I have a new mystery to solve and a good reason to shoot some Hiss for upgrade points and currency to make new astral constructs (guns).

Control's shooting may be the last thing anyone will talk about after the credits roll – like I said, there's a rubber duck that harasses you – but it's Remedy's best yet.

KEY CONCEPTS

Understanding the logic of Control



AWE (ALTERED WORLD EVENT)
Phenomena that result in the creation of OOPs.



AI (ALTERED ITEM)
Objects with special powers due to AWEs.



OOP (OBJECT OF POWER)
AIs that imbue people with similar powers.



FBC (FEDERAL BUREAU OF CONTROL)
Oversees study of AIs & OOPs.



THE HISS
An alien and incomprehensible entity infecting FBC employees.



THE BOARD
A transdimensional triangle that commands all.

Enemies drop health where they die and Jesse is so fragile that you have to constantly push the enemy position to stay alive, *Doom 2016* style. It's propped up by smart interplay between the weapon system and extremely satisfying telekinetic abilities.

The Service
Weapon morphs between two forms of your choosing, each representing a fairly standard videogame gun archetype. Ammo isn't a thing though, as 'magazines' are represented by energy.

Empty the weapon and it'll recharge after a few seconds, a nice bit of encouragement to reposition or use a telekinetic ability, which have their own recharging energy bar.

It's energy bar ping-pong: shoot, use an ability, shoot, use an ability. In detail: I headshot a soldier with my shotty, leap into the air, dash up to the second floor, throw an industrial copier at the shielded guy at the back of the room, wing a few pistol shots at someone dashing between cover, summon the rubble around me as a shield to absorb the incoming rocket, then grab the next rocket with telekinesis and fling into an unlucky Hiss soldier. This one's strapped to a chair and floating

around in the sky, a fellow telekinesis user. With their health low, I use mind control to turn them to my side. Telekinetic buds, tossing file cabinets around. Good times.

OFFICE DESTRUCTION

With a complete arsenal of abilities, I'm able to bounce around the big, multi-tiered arenas like Superman with a handgun permit. But before I found the dash and shield abilities, and before I finished enough missions to upgrade my health and energy reserves, I was too often pinned to a corner and easily overwhelmed. Early combat encounters are bland and frustrating compared to what follows.

When you're fully powered-up, Remedy's love of flying objects comes to the fore. Every dash sends papers fluttering, coffee cups crashing. Jesse can toss any object in the environment with her brain, turning banal office spaces and retro futurist underground labs into disaster areas. Levitating pulls errant objects into Jesse's orbit, like lazy little moons: staplers, rubble, pencils, printers, corpses. Max Payne would be proud.

But the momentum peters out right when things come together. Chasing every skill upgrade through endgame sidequests (the credits aren't the end-end) too often climaxes in boss encounters that are conceptually interesting but no fun to fight. The upgrades are too simple to feel worth chasing anyway. Given how playful the combat already is, I would've loved to see some comparably creative deviations in the skill tree. As it stands, it's just killing stuff to do what you already do more efficiently. Feels great, but doesn't change much.

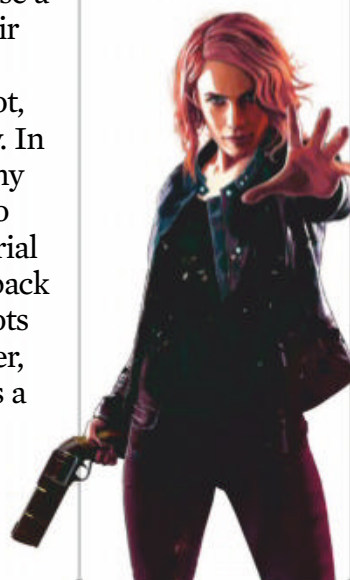
And yet, my second lap of The Oldest House is still unearthing new discoveries, entire wings I missed at first, more Altered Items playing clever tricks, hidden bosses, and secret areas.

Control's combat is slow to start and its overarching story doesn't go far enough, but it's a gorgeous font of wonders and poop monsters and wild physics unlike anything I've played in recent memory. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Control's thin protagonist and abrupt ending are propped up by mystery and room-destroying combat.

88



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APE ESCAPISM

Evolution by repetition in survival game
ANCESTORS: THE HUMANKIND ODYSSEY. By Chris Livingston

The aroused moaning of the prehistoric ape I'm trying to bang is getting to be a bit much. She's really into this backrub I'm giving her, but I'm having trouble feeling the mood myself. We're squatting in the freezing rain, my leg is broken, I have an orphaned toddler clinging to my back, and another member of my clan is enthusiastically picking his nose in my sightline. It's not even a tiny bit romantic, but hey – I'm trying to save our species.

Listening to an ape get horny as I rub her hairy back isn't the only thing I'm not keen on in third-person survival game *Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey*. It begins 10 million years in the past with you controlling the leader of a small clan of hominids – the distant precursors to human beings that eventually evolved, invented computers, developed games about ancient hominids, and wrote reviews about them. Like evolution itself, *Ancestors* is slow, often uneventful, and a frequently frustrating struggle.

MONKEYSHINES

An average day in *Ancestors* is spent exploring the forests of Africa, using your senses to examine your surroundings. But the novelty of detecting something by sound or scent wears off almost immediately due to repetition and awkward controls. When I want to use my senses to investigate something, I need to stop moving completely. Then I need to make sure I'm not close to any rock, stick, plant, or food item or I'll get the prompt to interact with that item instead of the prompts

to use my senses, resulting in a lot of awkward shuffling around. Even just trying to target another hominid for an interaction is a fiddly annoyance, like the endless backrubs I need to perform in hopes of convincing one to mate with me.

Starting *Ancestors* over again from the beginning is a major drag

There's naturally lots of climbing and jumping around on the cliffs and trees, which can be exhilarating when making long leaps to snag vines and branches, but much less fun when you miss.

Most expeditions wind up with me plummeting to the ground at least once and shattering my leg. The finer movements of my hominid are even more difficult, like trying to transition from a vertical tree trunk to a horizontal branch, which takes a lot of manoeuvring and re-adjusting.

Discovery itself, though, can be satisfying. Early on I find another hominid, a stranger to my clan, up in a tree, holding his wrist as if in pain. Having broken my leg a half-dozen times by this point, I know there's a type of plant that provides a buff for bone strength, so I bring him a handful of it and he's grateful enough to join my clan. There's also a little

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A survival RPG set 10 million years ago

EXPECT TO PAY
£33

DEVELOPER
Panache Digital Games

PUBLISHER
Private Division

REVIEWED ON
Intel i5-6600K, GTX 980 8 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
ancestorsgame.com

thrill when learning how to use tools, like stripping a branch into a spear or using a rock to smash open a cacao pod to drink its pulp.

STICKS AND STONES

The African wilderness is filled with threats from wild boars to giant snakes to massive crocodiles, but combat in *Ancestors* is a big sloppy mess. My greatest early achievement is my first fight with a rampaging machairodontinae (a big angry cat). But it's ruined by a tutorial box that partially obscures the fight itself, a notification that I've discovered how to use a stick as a weapon, and another notification that I've killed the cat, not to mention the terrible cinematic camera angle of what should have been a triumphant event.

If you survive and progress long enough, you can advance time hundreds of thousands of years at once and continue playing with the successors of your lineage. Your clan's experiences and knowledge are matched against science's estimation of the real thing when you make these evolutionary leaps. I was pretty stoked that my first clan, the Chunky Monkeys, was evolving faster than hominids actually did, mainly because I'd figured out how to bash things with chunks of obsidian earlier than my real-life ancestors did.

Alas, the lineage of the Chunky Monkeys was wiped out about a million years later after losing a few fights and running out of fertile females. Starting *Ancestors* over again from the beginning is a major drag, having to re-discover every leaf and plant I've already long since grown tired of gathering, sniffing, and tasting – not to mention all those backrubs. I haven't finished *Ancestors* yet, but I've had enough of it. ■

LEVELUTION

How have we evolved as a video game species since the time of *Ancestors*?

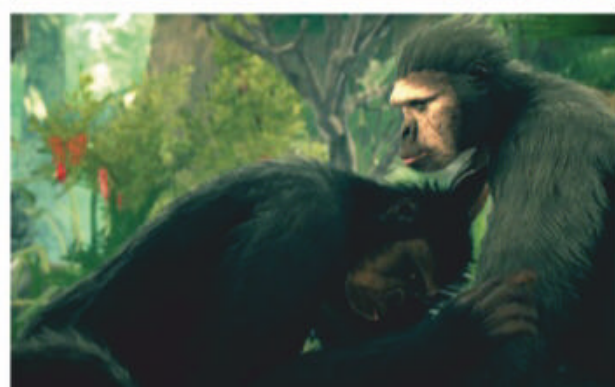
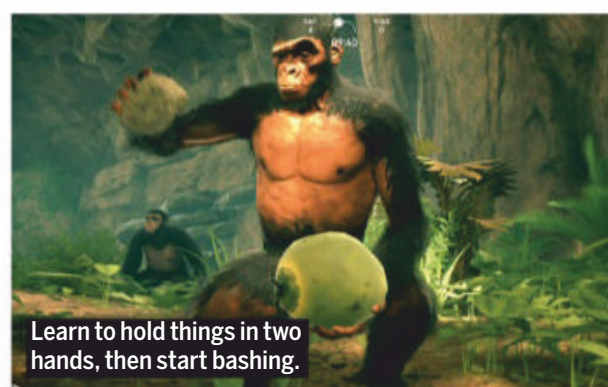
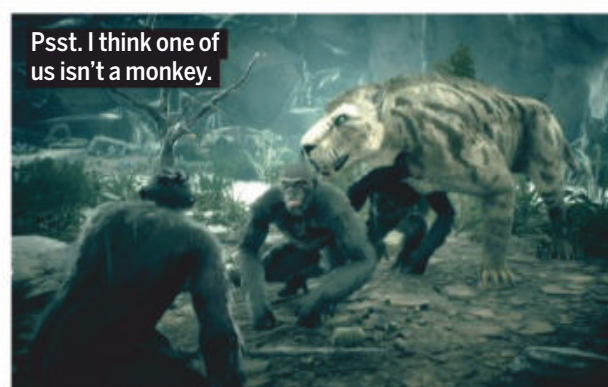
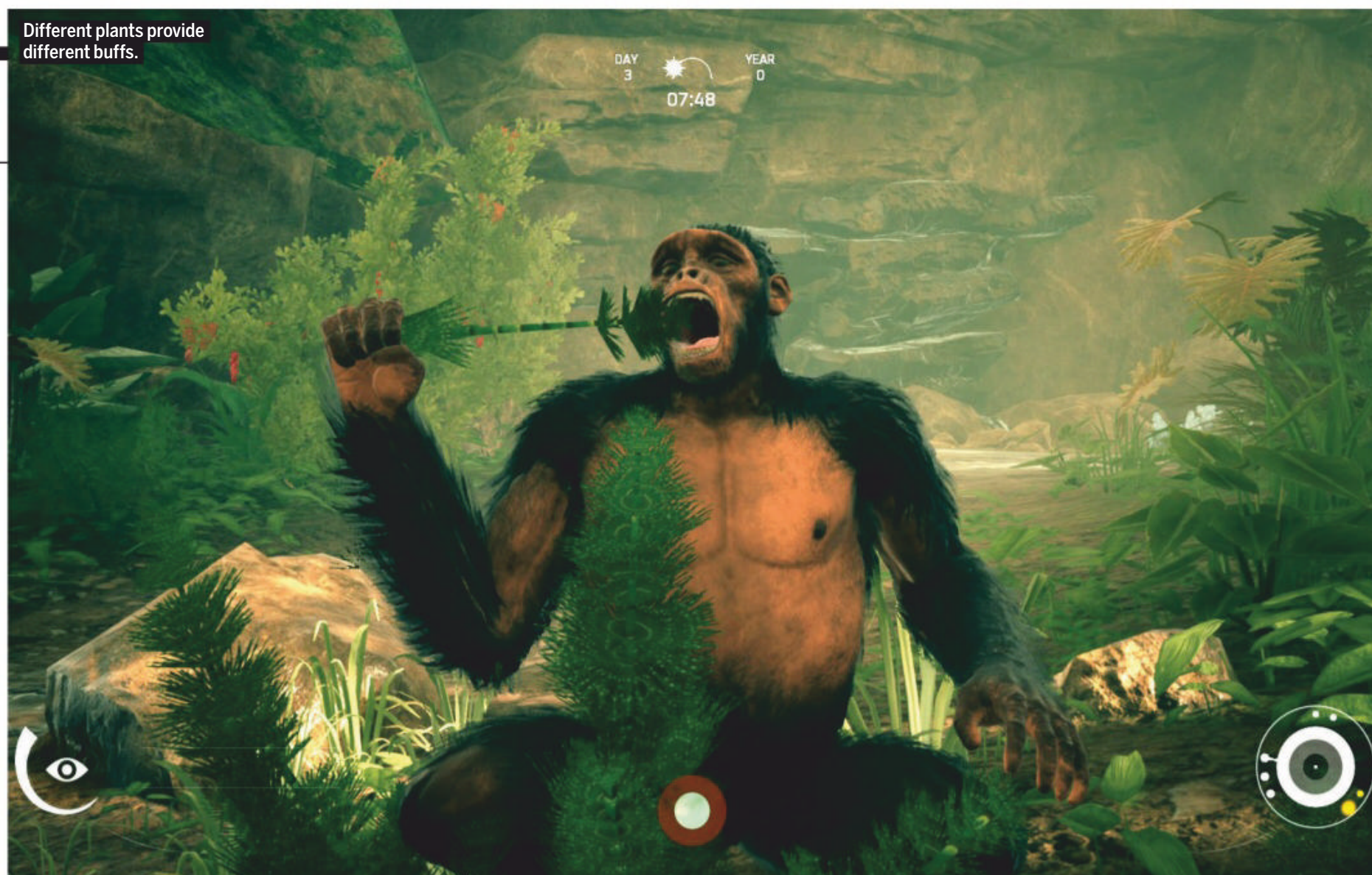


PC GAMER VERDICT

Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey is a novel premise wrapped in an awkward and repetitive survival slog.

58

Different plants provide different buffs.



FISTFUL OF CREDITS

REBEL GALAXY OUTLAW makes up in style what it lacks in depth. *By Robert Zak*

The boundless promise of space exploration is a precarious asteroid field for a developer to navigate. It takes the luxuries of time and funding for galaxies like those of *Elite Dangerous* or *No Man's Sky* to reach their potential. But if you're an indie developer bereft of those resources, then it's vital to know your limits – to condense the cosmos into something manageable, lest your game get swallowed up by its seductive vastness.

Rebel Galaxy Outlaw knows its limits, restricting its galaxy to 40-odd solar systems named after cities in the US. Its guitar-twanging rock soundtrack and vibrant colours give it the tone of a punky western. It's thrifty where it needs to be, and does a commendable job of embellishing its relatively rote gameplay loop with presentational swagger.

Driving the game's spunky spirit is the protagonist Juno, a tough vagabond on the trail of the people who killed her husband and tried to knock her off too. You gain most of your intel by chatting with the patrons of bars dotted around the various space stations of the cosmos.

There's a pleasing air of shadiness about these haunts as everyone seems to know something for the right price, and there are mini-games such as pool, slots and arcade machines that you can kick back with after an expedition into not-so-deep space. Unfortunately, you don't get to

walk around the bars and stations, instead interacting only through menus and in-game cutscenes. This is an indie game, lest you forget.

Things get tough out there in the coruscating cosmos. It may look like a neon-tinged music video set in the *Guardians Of The Galaxy* universe, but it can be unforgiving, and I find myself dying often in my ungainly cargo container of a starting ship.

Combat sticks

within the norm of dogfighting space sims, with a few well-advised convenience controls and snippets of flair raising it a little bit beyond the mean. You have the usual assortment of blippy lasers and blasty missiles, but one of the better features is auto-follow, activated by holding the left trigger. Not only is this great for orientation, but turn up your thrusters and you can really get up close to enemy ships, chasing them down as you dart between clusters of space debris and freighters.

Realistically, you'll spend the bulk of your spacefaring in combat

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A colourful combat-focused space western

EXPECT TO PAY

£24

DEVELOPER

Double Damage Games

PUBLISHER

Double Damage Games

REVIEWED ON

Windows 10, Intel Core i7, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

rebel-galaxy.com

You can bring up a radial menu too, which pauses the game while you scan the area for enemies and pickups, or use the local map to select a target and zero in on it within the instance of space that you're in. As you progress through the story, you'll also meet characters who you can call in as buddies during a dogfight, intensifying the action and making the enemy's job that bit harder.

The structure of missions will also be familiar to those who have played other space sims. You chat to bar patrons or go to mission boards, and take on a variety of reconnaissance, combat, and delivery expeditions.

The main story quest is a slightly more verbose twist on the above, as you get pulled into a plot of corporate greed and underhand dealings, but the writing doesn't quite invest you in it. Somewhere between the sullen, bone-dry personality of Juno, and the limited cut-scenes and conversations through which it's told, this revenge tale loses its spark.

SPACE TRUCKERS

There are hints that you can play *Rebel Galaxy Outlaw* as a plucky trading vessel, with a dynamic fluctuating market that lets you trade goods, as well as the higher-risk activity of ferrying counterfeit goods to those willing to buy them. But realistically, you'll spend the bulk of your spacefaring in combat. This can get a little repetitive, but with the carrot of ship upgrades and better weapons dangling over you, it offers enough incentive to keep pushing on.

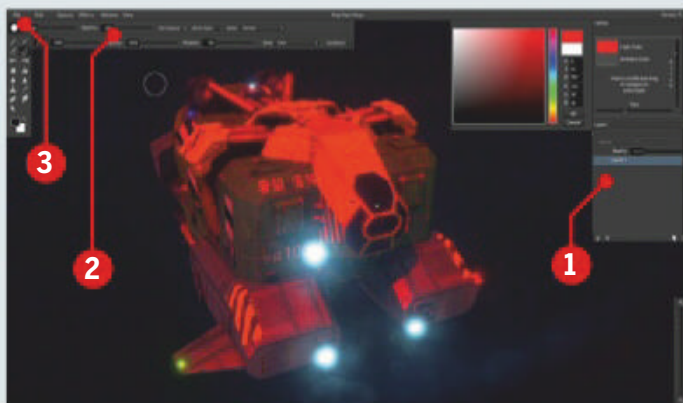
Rebel Galaxy Outlaw lives up to its name among space sims. It's spirited, good-looking and vibrant, effectively spraying several cans of blue and pink graffiti over the existing space sim template you're used to. ■

I MADE THIS *Design your own ships to take into space*

Rebel Galaxy Outlaw pretty much offers a light Photoshop suite when it comes to designing your own spaceships.

1 LAYERS

Divvy up your work, see specific layers in isolation, and delude yourself that you've a talent for graphic design.



2 OPACITY

Opacity changes the intensity of your paint tool, allowing for more subtle effects than just plain old splodges.

3 3D PRINTING

Once your ship is painted you can even print a 3D model of it... if you have a 3D printer knocking around.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Rebel Galaxy Outlaw is a lively space-western that sacrifices other games' scale in favour of more style.

78

The in-ship HUDs are pleasingly blocky and retro-stylised.



A screenshot from the game Star Wars: The Old Republic showing the interior of Port Lubbock. A character in a purple uniform is seen from behind, looking towards a large, industrial space station. The station has a prominent sign that reads "Welcome to DODGE SECTOR". The environment is filled with blue and white lights, and various mechanical structures and pipes are visible. A text box in the top right corner contains the text: "You can't freely walk around space stations, but each has a distinctive feel."

There are 40 star systems to explore in *Rebel Galaxy Outlaw*.

Montana Systems

- BELLGRADE
- BILLINGS
- CAPABLE
- DANFORTH
- RAVALLI
- CARTERSVILLE SUPERMAX
- CLINCH REFINERY
- TETON POLICE
- CARALLENTO

As you earn credits, you can get your hands on more formidable space vessels.



The colour palette is more vivid and saturated than in other space sims.

DIRECT-TO-VIDEOGAMES

MAN OF MEDAN makes clichéd horror feel fresh again. *By James Davenport*

Man of Medan isn't particularly scary. If it were a movie, it'd be the kind that releases direct-to-video, one of those schlocky DVDs lining the convenience store displays. The usual character archetypes are there: the nerd, the hunk, the blonde, the stranger, the horny creep that no one should put up with but do because at least one death should be cathartic. Queue up the ghost ship, pirates, and cheap jump scares galore.

As a film, it would be fun, but familiar and forgettable. But as co-op adventure game, *Man of Medan* is unparalleled. Think of it like a movie where you take control of one character at a time, oscillating between quicktime action scenes and dialogue sequences. Occasionally you'll get time to look for story clues, tools, and soak in the setting.

Early into my online co-op playthrough, my coworker Joanna and I coerce our ship captain into letting us explore a sunken plane at the bottom of the ocean, but we don't play two characters in the same scene. We play different scenes simultaneously.

In mine, a young couple explores the underwater wreck. As Julia, I reject my insecure partner's relationship questions and stick to the matter at hand – the skeletons chilling in the plane's disintegrating chassis. I mash X as part of a surprise quicktime event to avoid cutting my thigh on a sharp edge. Joanna laughs

at my shrill yip over Discord. Later I'll scream "LEECHES!" louder than I ever have and Joanna's laughter matches the volume. The jump scares might be cheap and plentiful, but with a friend they're hilarious.

We're playing telephone and two adventure games simultaneously

Meanwhile, Joanna's playing as Captain Fliss up on the ship, coolly rejecting Conrad's every pickup line. (They get to second base in my solo run.) But I only know what Joanna tells me, so when she says a boat

is approaching our own, I worry. I really worry when the boat speeds off and drags the diver line across the plane, knocking the cockpit off.

Imagine how I feel when I see two explosions up top as I surface. Do I swim up and risk giving Julia the bends or slowly depressurise with her neurotic boyfriend? At least he didn't just ask Julia to marry him this time. The next playthrough, he does, and I send Julia up immediately.

It's my turn to listen to Joanna panic while juggling her own choices

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A cooperative slasher movie where anyone can die

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Supermassive Games

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080, i9-9900k,
32 GB RAM, SSD
Multiplayer: Two-player
co-op

MULTIPLAYER
Two-player co-op

LINK
bandainamcoent.com

or button prompts – I'm in the dark. She eventually gets some vital info across that informs my next move. We're playing telephone and two adventure games simultaneously, a tense, hilarious combo.

SUMATRA SISTER

Half of *Man of Medan* keeps Joanna and I separated, playing unique interconnected scenes. Based on the clues we discover and the decisions we make, we're able to both avoid disaster and steer headlong into it, depending on what we choose to share. It's a fascinating way to experience a story together, steering relationships and action based on what you've observed, what you've shared, and quick reflexes.

Failure is usually fun, a necessary part of horror. But death isn't always ceremonious, often cut short from one failed quicktime event or a misread button prompt.

At least the deaths look amazing. *Man of Medan* is a graphical stunner supported by unnerving voyeuristic camera angles. Realistic animations with syrupy controls mimic the vulnerable, clumsy nature of each character, compromised by questionable facial tics.

It's not as fun as co-op, but *Man of Medan* is still surprising alone. My solo story ended with a completely different cast and lasting consequences, but I don't want to poke around the same three-ish hour long B-movie to see every outcome. The characters are too clichéd and the plot too simple to make it worth the time. But as an ambient experience played over time, *Man of Medan* is worth returning to for the social experience. What kind of incompetent hot people death-cocktail can we make, I wonder? ■

MEET THE TEAM

A who's who and who can be whom in Man of Medan



JULIA
Rich kid hungry for adventure or prime Darwin Award candidate?



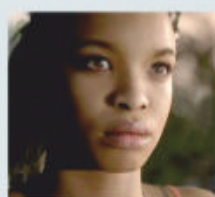
ALEX
Arrogant hunk or affable hunk? Alex is Julia's boyfriend. He may propose.



BRAD
Total loser dweeb or underdog hero, Brad is Alex's scrawny brother.



CONRAD
Horny creep or saint with an ego, Julia's party boy sibling.



FLISS
Is she a stern law-abiding captain or Cool Teacher That Drinks?

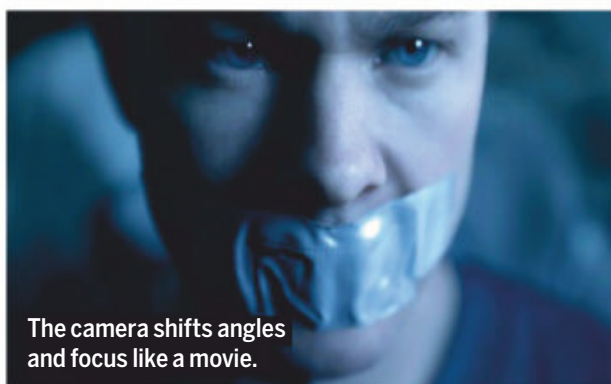
PC GAMER

VERDICT

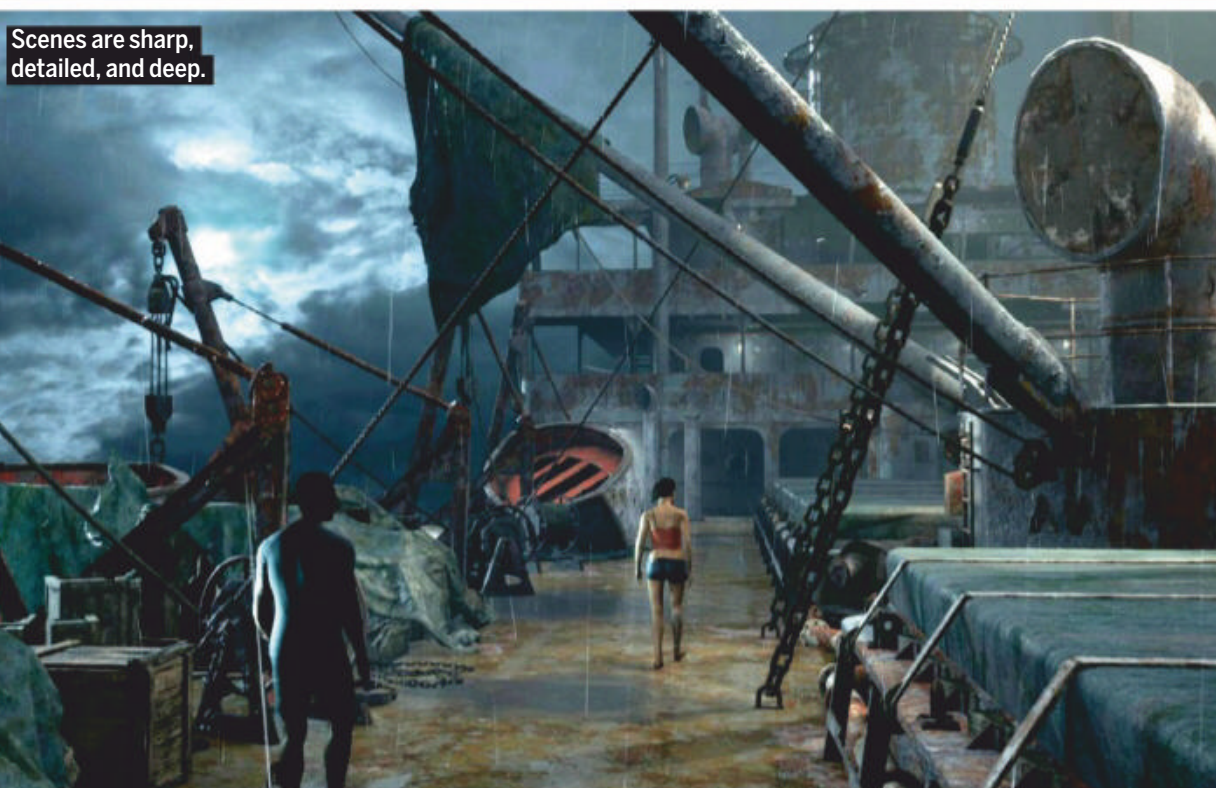
Man of Medan tells a familiar horror b-movie story, but in a fascinating way that's even moreso with a partner.

81

You cannot romance the doll.



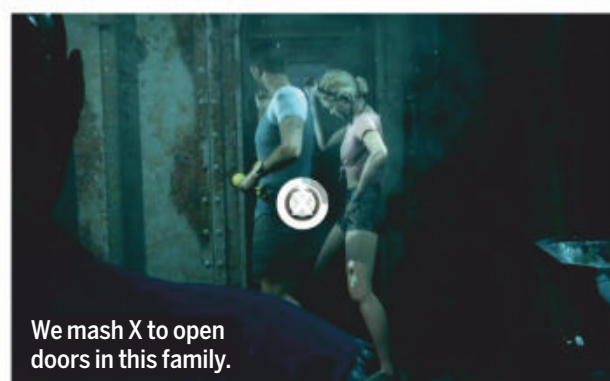
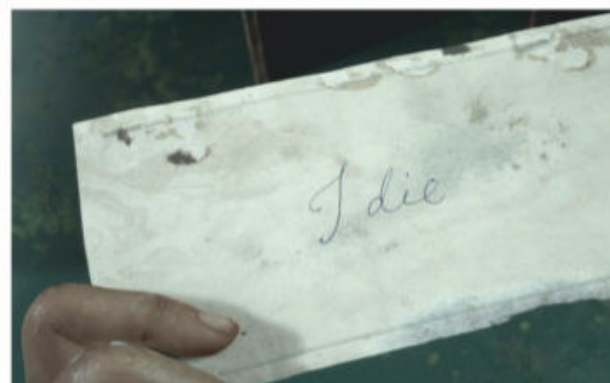
The camera shifts angles and focus like a movie.



Scenes are sharp, detailed, and deep.



A jarring UI doesn't make heartbeat sequences any less tense.



We mash X to open doors in this family.

SWEET LITTLE LIES

Separating fact from fiction in **TELLING LIES**,
the next game from the creator of Her Story. *By Andy Kelly*

Telling Lies is a series of one-sided conversations. You play as a woman whose motives are initially unclear and who has been given access to an archive of secretly recorded video calls taken from the laptops and mobile phones of four very different people. When the game begins you know nothing about them. These troubled souls are complete strangers to you and their lives are a mystery.

But by the end you'll know them intimately, and will have uncovered a series of shocking truths about their lives. Well, in theory. Because some of these people are, as the title suggests, liars. Separating fact from fiction is at the heart of this new 'desktop adventure' from the creator of narrative experiment *Her Story*. Like that game, your interpretation of the plot is determined by which clips you find in your playthrough, and the order you view them in.

As you search the database you'll see clips of a father reading his daughter a bedtime story, a couple watching a movie together, and other snippets of people just living their lives. But then you'll hear something that piques your curiosity. A reference to a mysterious incident, a name, or a place. And you'll search for these things in the database, unravelling yet more intriguing threads, slowly revealing an intricate, labyrinthine story that takes place across two years.

The game's blend of the blandly domestic and the thrilling is an effective one, setting the lives of the characters against a bubbling plot of conspiracy and duplicity.

I'm being vague here, but that's because even telling you the characters' names would spoil the experience. Discovering these things yourself by paying close attention to the dialogue, and sometimes the environment, is part of what makes *Telling Lies* such a rewarding detective game. Especially when you realise that something a character has said about themselves could be (and

often is) a lie, encouraging you to find more clips buried in the database to reveal the truth.

Starting the game with literally nothing, and ending it with a complex story mapped out in your head, is an immensely satisfying experience.

It almost felt like a personal betrayal when I learned something about a character that contradicted everything I thought I knew about them, which reflects the

experience of some of the characters in the story. *Telling Lies* is incredibly absorbing, especially if you play at night, in a dimly lit room, with your headphones on.

The moody, almost neo-noir atmosphere, and a gorgeous, cinematic score – composed by Nainita Desai, performed by the London Contemporary Orchestra

**One minute it's
a family drama,
the next it's a
tense crime
thriller**

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An investigative thriller set on a computer desktop

EXPECT TO PAY
£15.49

DEVELOPER
Furious Bee, Sam Barlow

PUBLISHER
Annapurna Interactive

REVIEWED ON
GTX 1080, Intel i5-6600K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
www.annapurna.pictures

– makes it a game you can really lose yourself in.

IMPRESSIVE ACTING

Telling Lies is a lot of things at once, jumping between moods, themes, and genres regularly. One minute it's a family drama, the next it's a tense crime thriller. And it's all brilliantly acted, with a cast of established film and TV actors providing some impressively natural-sounding dialogue. Logan Marshall-Green was the highlight for me, playing his duplicitous, conflicted character with real depth. But the whole cast is great, and the production values are excellent throughout – which is just as well, because 99 percent of the game is watching video clips.

That doesn't mean this is a passive experience, though. Far from it. You aren't just watching a story play out in *Telling Lies* – you're constructing one. A seemingly throwaway word in a conversation – the name of a city, perhaps, or even something more subtle than that – can be massively important, opening up a whole new winding subplot that totally transforms your understanding of the story. This means you have to be constantly engaged with the characters and what they're saying, and if you're anything like me, writing down pages of notes.

The game takes place entirely within the desktop of a PC. There are some clues scattered around here – documents, images, notes – that give you an idea of who you are and what you're looking for. You can drag windows around, write things down in a notes app, and even play a spot of *Solitaire* if your brain needs a rest.

The whirr of the PC's fans, the churn of the hard drive as you access video files, and the moving reflection of a face – your face – in the smudgy sheen of the monitor makes interacting with the computer feel wonderfully tactile.

Occasionally, and I could never figure out if this was random or triggered by something specific, the

CASTING CALL

Films and TV shows the cast have been in



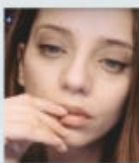
LOGAN MARSHALL-GREEN
• The O.C.
• Spider-Man: Homecoming
• Prometheus



KERRY BISHÉ
• Life on Mars
• Argo
• Scrubs

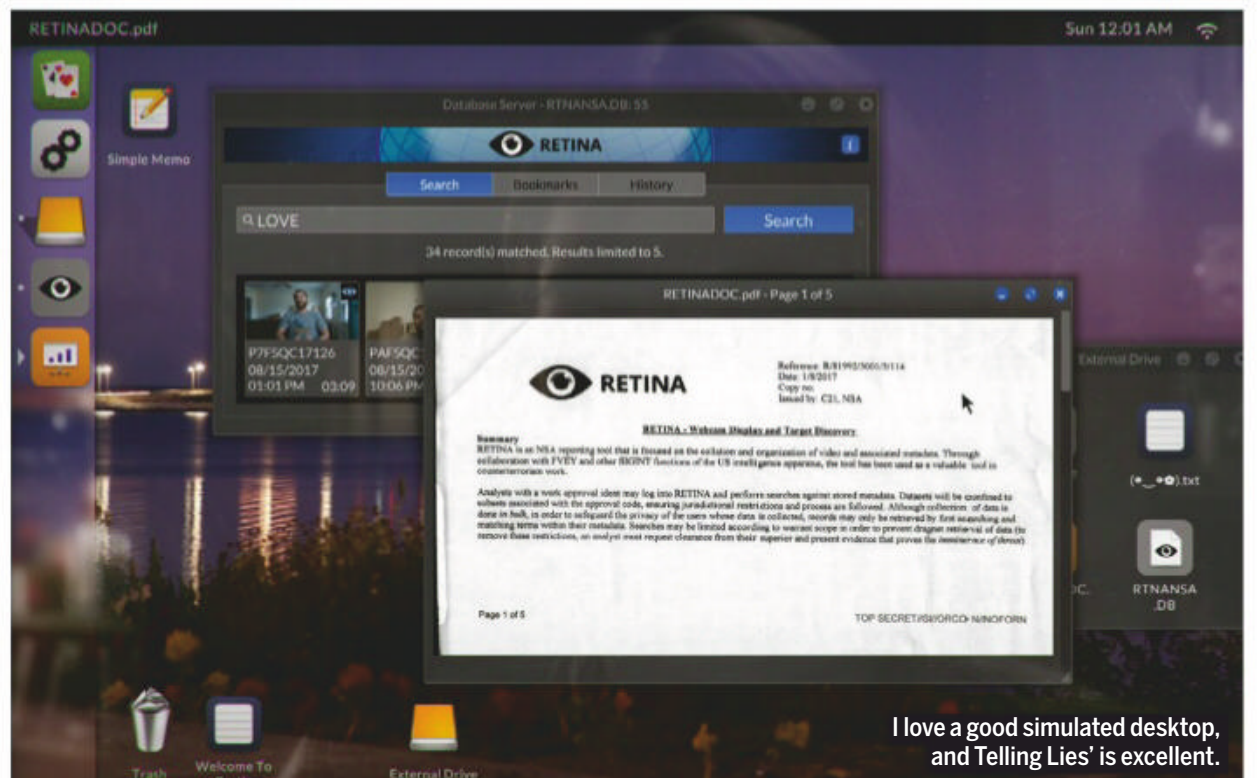
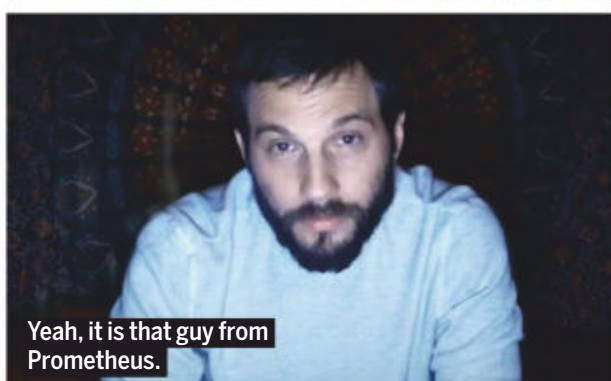
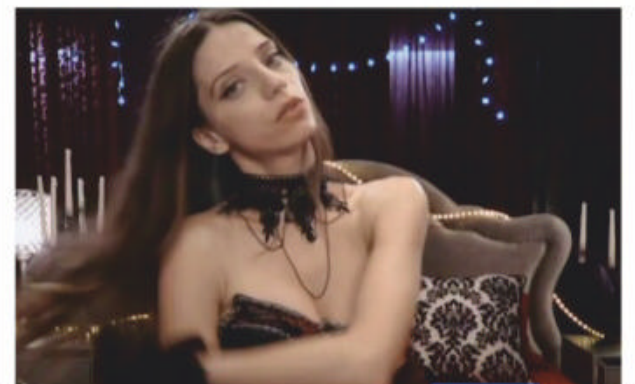
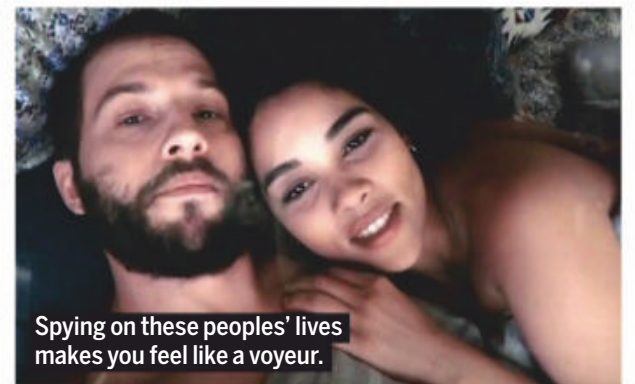
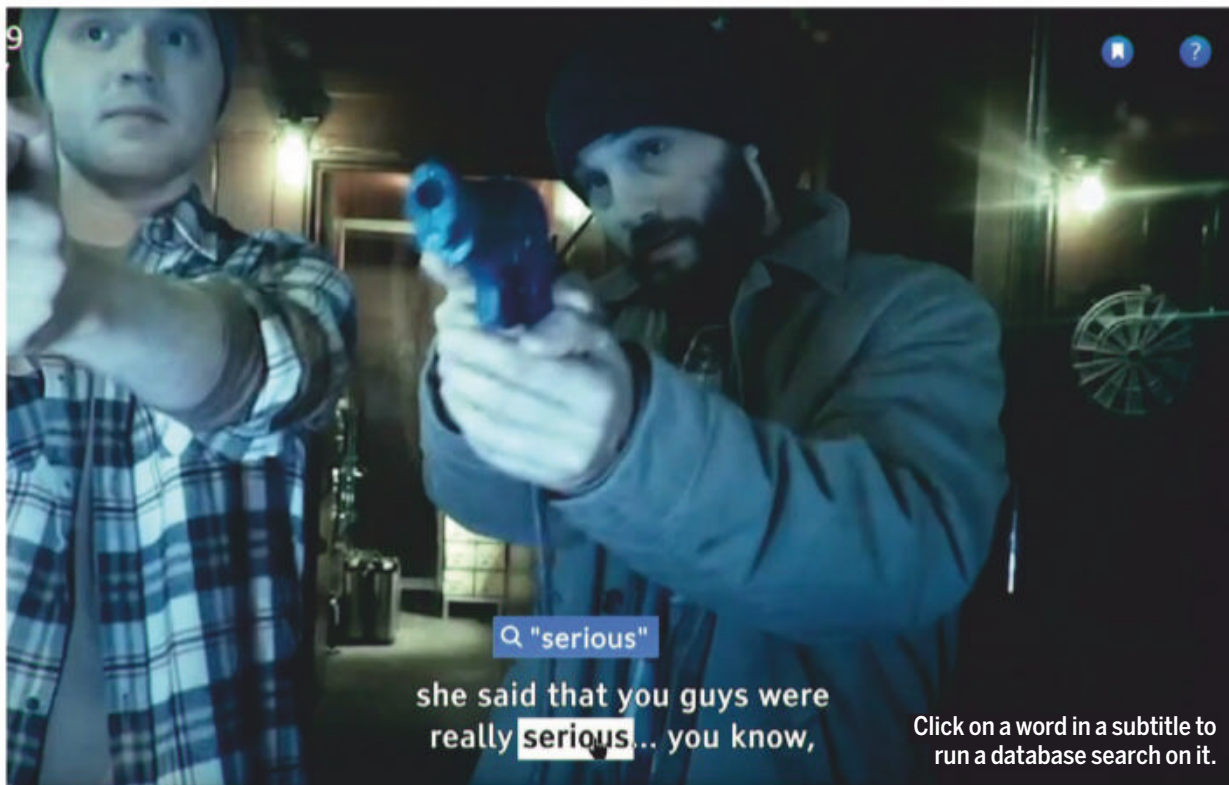
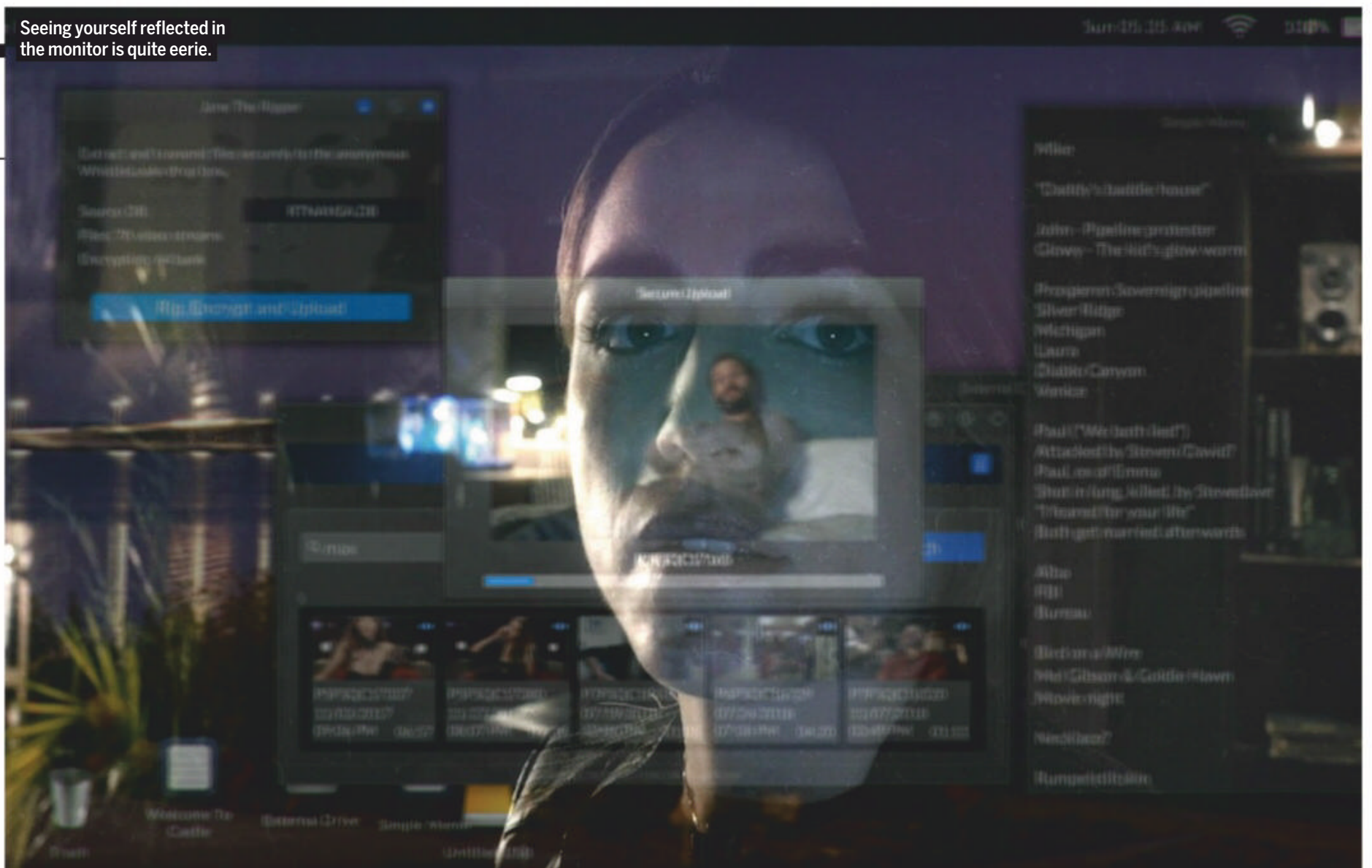


ALEXANDRA SHIPP
• X-Men: Apocalypse
• Straight Outta Compton
• Dark Phoenix



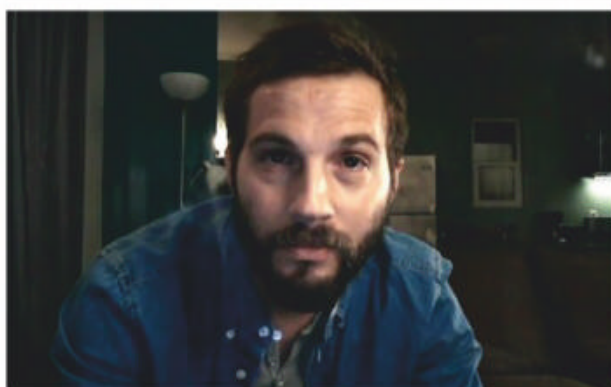
ANGELA SARAFYAN
• American Horror Story
• Westworld
• Buffy the Vampire Slayer

Seeing yourself reflected in the monitor is quite eerie.

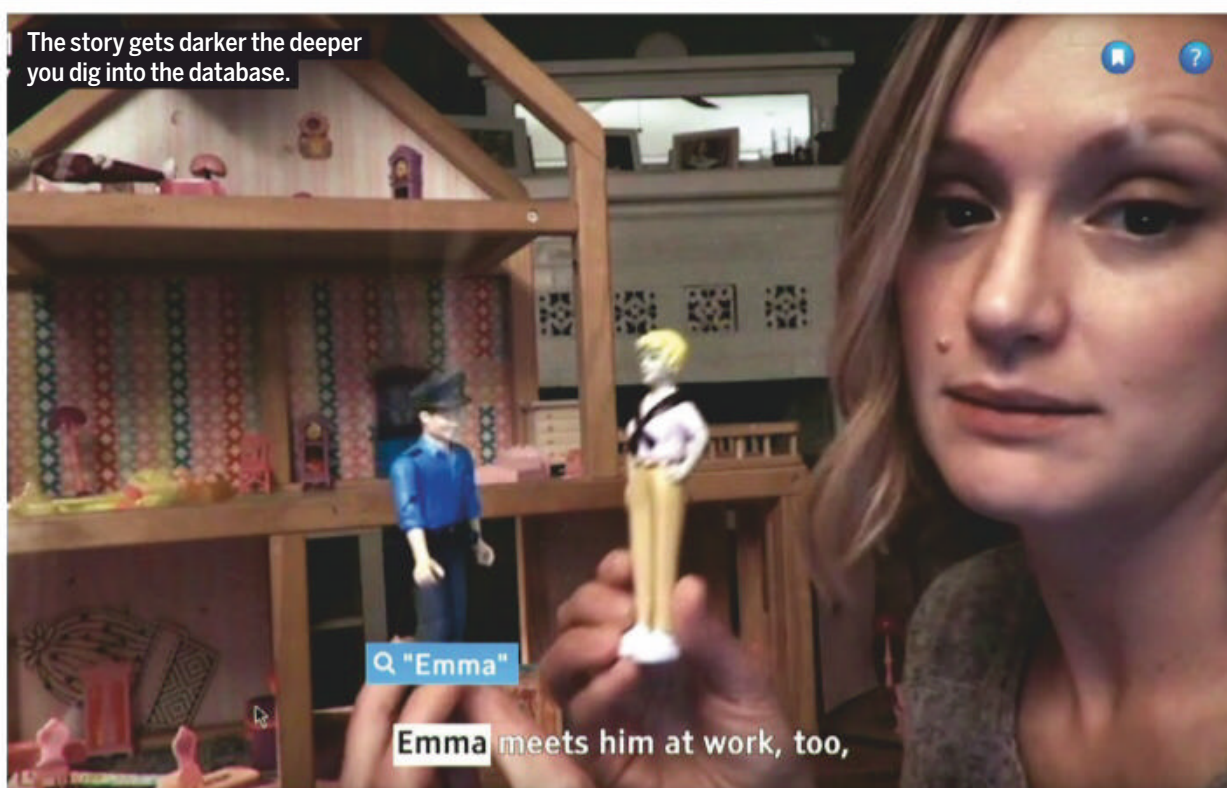


I love a good simulated desktop, and 'Telling Lies' is excellent.

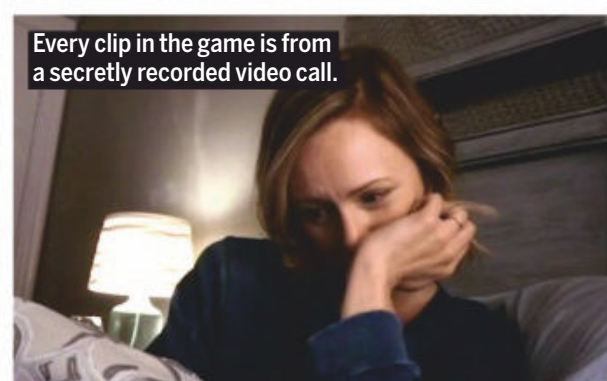
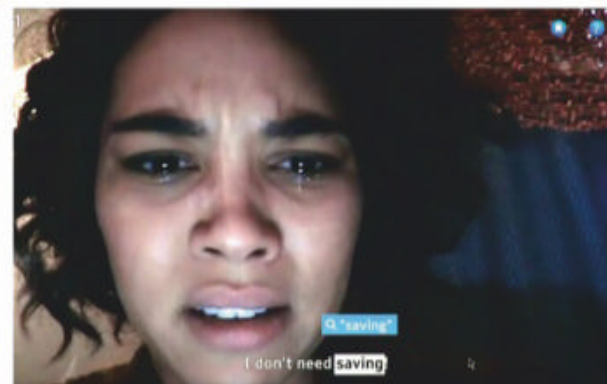
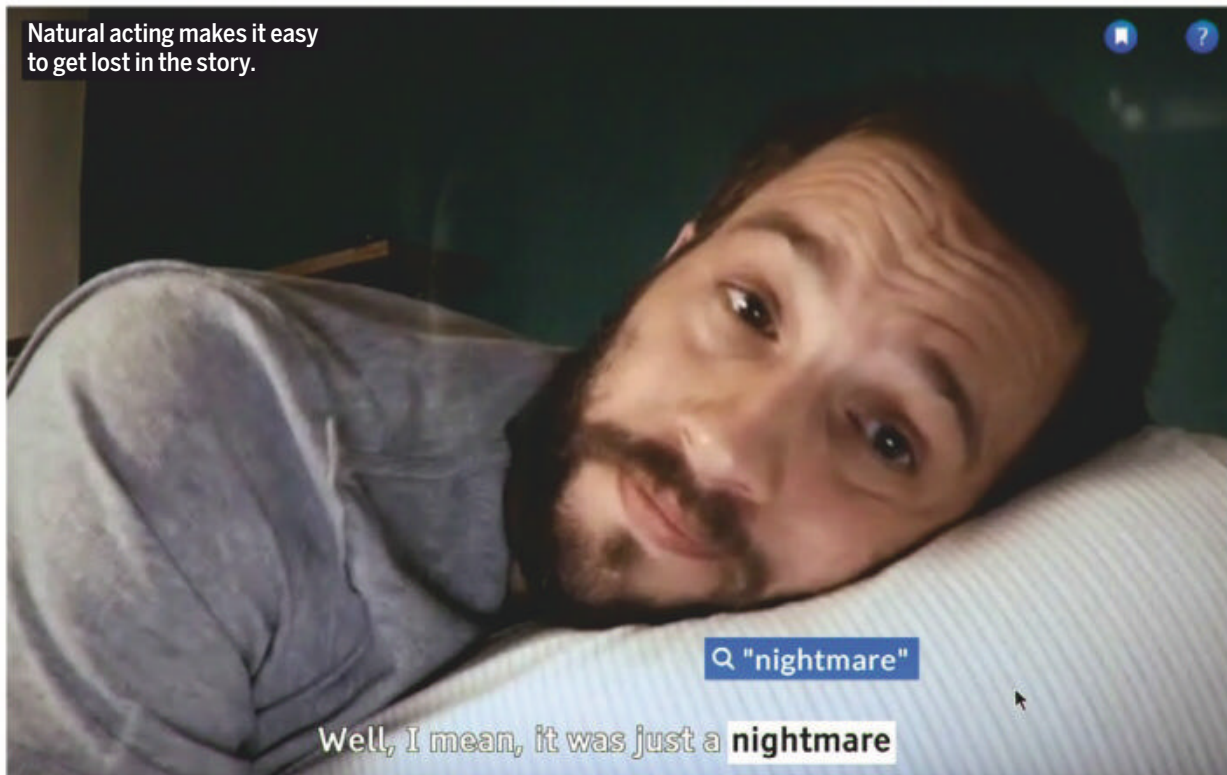
There's an impressive variety of locations and characters.



The story gets darker the deeper you dig into the database.



You can't take anything you see in Telling Lies at face value.



Every clip in the game is from a secretly recorded video call.

» reflection in the monitor will become clearer and you'll see something happening in the woman's apartment. One of these moments in particular is very clever, and made me jump because I was so engrossed in the story. But again, it's best if you discover it yourself. There are a lot of nice, mischievous little details in *Telling Lies*, like how your vision blurs if you stare at the screen for too long without moving the cursor – simulating the fact that you're supposed to be looking through these video clips in the wee hours.

It's also something of a stroke of genius to only show you one side of each conversation, leaving you to fill in the blanks or do some database hunting to find the other half. Wondering what the person is reacting to, or what the other person is saying, gives the game an extra layer of mystery.

This also means that, in a lot of the videos, you'll just be watching the subject sitting in silence, listening to the unheard person on the other end of the call. But thankfully you can scrub through any clip you find, rewinding, pausing, and fast-forwarding at your leisure. You can also bookmark important clips and view a log of all your searches.

One thing I miss from *Her Story*, however, is the database tracker. This lets you know how many clips you've found, and how many remain undiscovered, and I found it a useful way to get an idea of how complete a picture I had of the story. *Telling Lies* is much more opaque in comparison, by design, but the completionist in me was left with the feeling that I hadn't seen everything.

A report at the end of the game gives you a vague idea of how many you found (in my first playthrough it said 'just under half'), but I'd have liked a more explicit visualisation of how much of the narrative I had left to uncover. This hardly dampened my enjoyment of the game, but it's one thing I wish had made it over from *Her Story*.

Because the conversations you're watching and listening to are so private, I experienced a really powerful connection to the characters in *Telling Lies* – almost feeling like I knew them by the end. But this also made me feel like a

This also made me feel like a creepy voyeur, seeing things I had no right to

creepy voyeur, seeing things I had no right to. There's something uneasy about listening to a couple talking intimately about their relationship, or watching a little girl in bed listening to her dad tell her a story. But I get the feeling that's what I was supposed to feel like, and if that was the case, well, it worked. However, my desire to know more about the characters and story always took precedent,

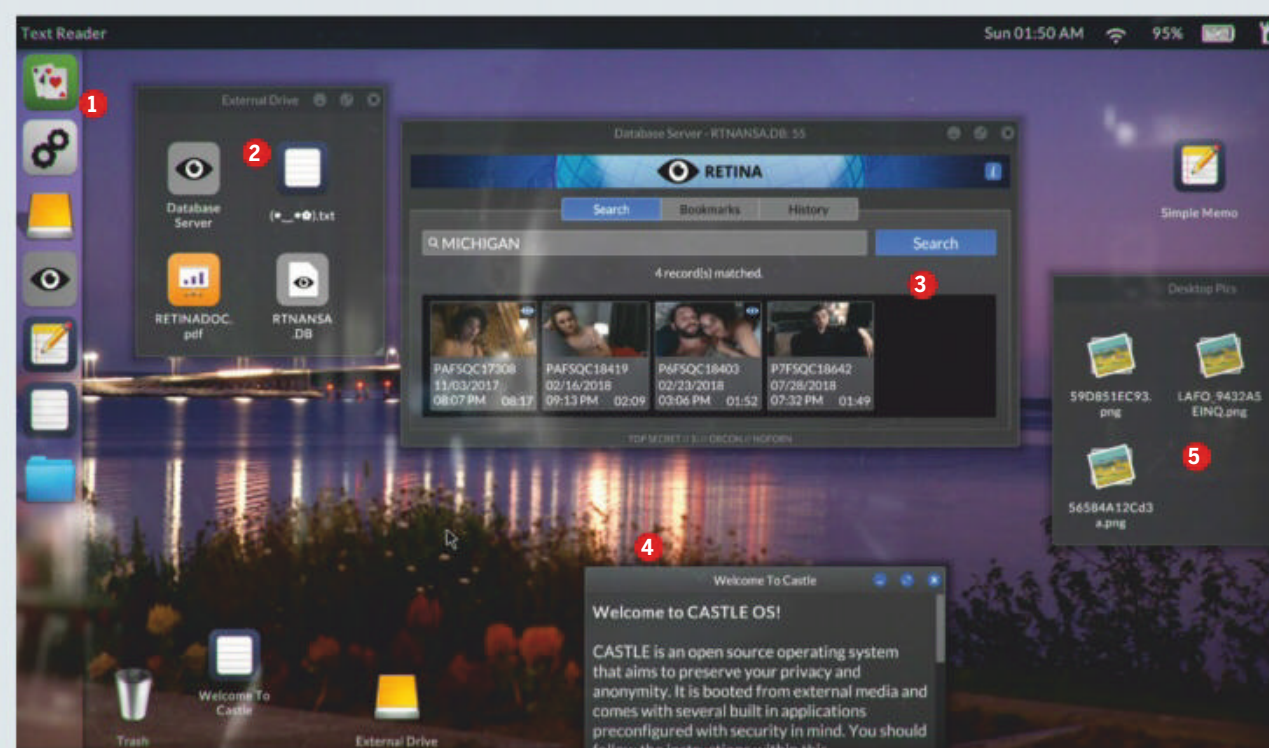
and the deeper I got tangled up in their lives, the more I fell in love with them, and the game.

BIGGER BUDGET

If you played *Her Story*, *Telling Lies* will be instantly familiar. It even has the same limit of only showing you five clips from any given search term, the explanation for which is a little more tortured this time around.

Essentially this is *Her Story* with a bigger budget, a much more sprawling story, and a surprisingly huge cast. Outside of the four main characters there are dozens of minor and background characters, and a

LOG ON *The desktop explained*



1 SOLITAIRE

There's a fully functional digital *Solitaire* built into *Telling Lies* if you've had enough of solving mysteries and fancy playing some cards.

2 EXTERNAL DRIVE

A drive given to you by... someone. Whoever it was, they have connections, because it contains some highly confidential files.

3 DATABASE

This is the archive of phone calls you have to search through. When you get a hit on a keyword, you can view five related videos.

4 GUIDE

A handy guide to CASTLE, the game's fictional operating system, designed for people to hide their tracks, which has some plot relevance.

5 IMAGES

A folder of old paintings found in the recycle bin. Do they have some significance? This is one of the game's many enigmatic mysteries.

few supporting characters who are just as fascinating as the stars of the show. So, in many ways, *Telling Lies* feels more like a refinement of what was established in *Her Story*, rather than a bold, new experiment in videogame storytelling.

But that's fine, because the core concept – an open-ended story that's revealed in a different way to every person who plays the game – is still enormously compelling, and only possible in this medium. You might find a clip in your first ten minutes that I found three hours in, and it's fascinating to think about how that would completely skew your perception of the story. But even with all this randomness, it's amazing how the game almost feels like it was paced and structured by hand. *Her Story* pulled the same trick, but the greater variety of stories here only heightens that sense of mystery, discovery, shock, and revelation. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

An atmospheric, brilliantly written and acted detective thriller that tells a compelling story in a unique way.

87

DARK DIVISION

REMNANT: FROM THE ASHES is a surprisingly nourishing mechanical soup. *By Rick Lane*

This odd genre mash-up looks like it was coughed out by a game development algorithm. It's equal parts a third-person looter-shooter and a *Dark Souls*-inspired boss rush, with a cooperative emphasis and a dynamically generated campaign. Stylistically it's inspired by fantasy, science-fiction, Westerns, post-apocalyptic worlds and various kinds of horror fiction. Even the title reads like it was generated by a Twitter bot.

And it gets off to a rather underwhelming start. Its introduction sees your character washed up on an island with nothing but a sword and the clothes on their back. Eventually you end up at Ward 13, the Firelink Shrine of *Remnant's* world. Here you learn that a race of tree-people called the Root have conquered Earth. Despite the fact that you've just arrived, the leader of the Ward decides you're the person to stop them. You're given a couple of guns and are dispatched into the endtimes.

It's an uninspired opening. The first hour of the campaign fares little better. *Remnant's* representation of a destroyed Earth is generic and dull, all reddish piles of rubble, hollowed-out tower blocks, and dank, brown sewers. Fortunately, you don't have much time to admire the scenery, as the Root are in your face like grass pollen in summertime.

While *Remnant* resembles a cover shooter, in practice it plays much

more like *Dark Souls* from an over-the-shoulder perspective. Basic enemies are aggressive and hit hard, so to stay alive for any length of time you need to evade their attacks. Gradually, you pick your way through

I craft a submachine gun that fires incendiary bullets

the ruins, moving between glowing crystals analogous to *Dark Souls'* bonfires and fighting creatively designed bosses. It's fine, but nothing stands out about the design.

Then *Remnant* conjures a castle out of the sky, and the whole game becomes far more interesting. Suddenly, you're no longer wandering the ruins of Earth. You're on Rhom, a desert planet populated by spear-chucking cavemen, living in the shadow of ancient obsidian obelisks. It's the beginning of a bonkers pan-dimensional adventure, and where the game's systems begin to pay off.

Unlike *The Division*, which drip-feeds the player incrementally better guns, *Remnant's* loot is less common and more tailored. The real

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A third person looter-shooter that takes blends *Division*-like gunplay with *Dark Souls*-style bosses

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
Gunfire Games

PUBLISHER
Perfect World

REVIEWED ON
Nvidia GTX Titan, Intel core i5-3570K 3.40 GHZ, 16 GB RAM,

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
www.remnantgame.com/en

treasures are dropped by bosses, powerful items which can be taken back to Ward 13 to craft new weapons and weapon mods. These weapons are as unique as the bosses used to make them. After defeating a fire-spitting demon called Singe, I craft a submachine gun that fires incendiary bullets as a default.

BOSS ENCOUNTERS

Remnant's most unique feature is its dynamically generated campaign. Environments can be laid out in different ways and dungeons located in different places. Similarly, each boss encounter has several possible variants. I played through the first half of *Remnant* twice, and in the second run, Singe was replaced by the Ent, a giant tree with a face like Cthulhu. It's a clever way of encouraging you to invest in other players' campaigns, and arguably better design than having a massive, shared world you only explore once.

Elsewhere, although *Remnant's* dimension-hopping makes for a fun adventure, the game struggles to tie its threads together narratively. *Remnant* borrows *Dark Souls'* approach to storytelling, using item descriptions and fragmented conversations with NPCs to build its lore. But *Dark Souls'* world is cogent, consistent, and painstakingly built. *Remnant* too often feels like it's making things up as it goes along. There are plot reasons for this revealed right at the end, but it's a bit of a cop-out, veering dangerously close to one of the most wearisome cliches in storytelling.

Nonetheless, I'd happily play more of *Remnant*. Its strange worlds, robust challenge, and bespoke loot make it a refreshing alternative to the drab militarism of *The Division*. ■

KNOW YOUR ENEMY *Remnant has several different enemy tiers, and knowing what you're up against is key to survival*



MOB

Basic enemies that populate the world. Most have both a melee and ranged attack, so you need to stay sharp.



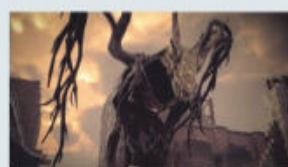
SPECIAL ENEMIES

These enemies spawn randomly as you explore, there's around four or five types of special enemy per world.



MINI-BOSS

These are souped up versions of basic and special enemies. Some of these are optional, others are not.



BOSS

Unique enemies that you'll fight at the end of a world. They're tough, powerful, and often involve a special gimmick.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

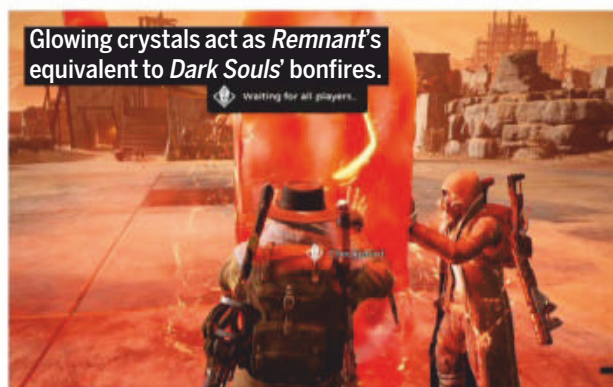
A flawed but fascinating hybrid, *Remnant: From the Ashes* is a looter-shooter that's charged with potential.

77

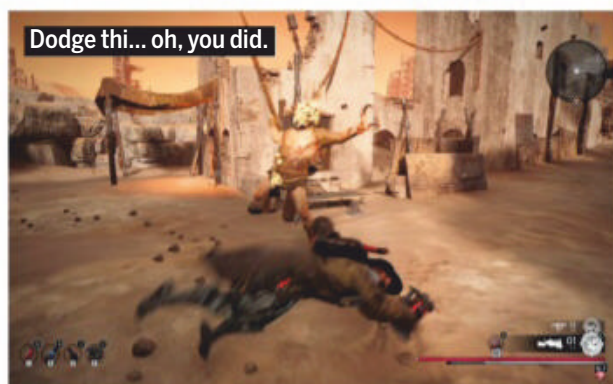
Stop, drop
and die.



Glowing crystals act as Remnant's
equivalent to Dark Souls' bonfires.



Dodge thi... oh, you did.



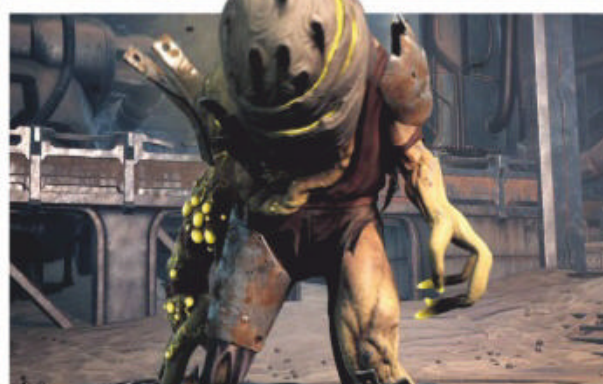
Remnant's opening area is a
bit on the drab side.



That's some impressive whittling.



The further you progress, the
more interesting the weapons get.



OR DIE TRYING

DICEY DUNGEONS forges one
RNG to rule them all. *By Phil Iwaniuk*

A lazy journalist would call this *Hearthstone* meets *Yahtzee*, and just as a stopped clock tells the right time twice a day, sometimes lazy journalist comparisons are bang on. *Dicey Dungeons* rolls you a few dice, presents you with cards which harness those dice in damage-dealing or character-buffing fashion, then pits you against a series of opponents in a dungeon-crawling RPG setting. It feels like playing a CCG while wearing X-ray specs.

Because while the roguelikes and card games that *Dicey Dungeons* is referencing with its visuals and mechanics would hide away their RNG elements, Terry Cavanagh's new game puts it under a spotlight. Quite literally. The setup is that of a gameshow, so while you're fighting sneezy hedgehogs and sharply dressed hammerhead sharks there's a studio audience gasping and cheering over it all. They ooh and aah when you open chests in its simple dungeon maps. There's even a wheel of fortune. Those disparate elements – rolling dice, D&D-inspired questing, and the gameshows of yesteryear – shouldn't gel together, but somehow it all feels like the most natural thing in the world while you're playing.

Cavanagh's previous games *VVVVVV* and *Super Hexagon* were about attritional runs against a conceptually simple but supremely demanding challenge. This – well, this is not. It's actually all rather friendly, starting you off with a tutorial and building on itself very gradually with each encounter. And sure, rolling two dice and dragging them over into two weapon card slots to deal damage might not sound captivating on paper, but every new element it introduces makes you stop for a second and re-evaluate where this is all leading.

Within the opening hour you're dealing out shock, fire, and freezing damage, locking opponents' dice, and firing off double-attacks when your limit break bar fills up from taking damage. And crucially, you feel like

some kind of mastermind tactician while you do it. That's the trick in *Dicey Dungeons*. You're always being given the chance to make a smart decision, whether it's holding off on doing damage to pool some dice into

a healing card or using buffs to hit exact numbers required by status effect cards. I'm sure there's still another layer of RNG beneath the hood that makes for the most entertaining fights – I mean, the Loud Bird I

encountered at level five rolled one double, an even and two dice under five every round when I fought him – but with the information you have, there are always opportunities to pull off something that feels clever.

At the end of each dungeon run is a boss, and a new unlockable character. Bosses offer surprisingly little challenge though, and are sometimes outmatched by one or two of the enemies you had to best on the way to them. Unusually lenient from the developer who made surviving

It's easy to be pulled into the surreal '90s cartoon-like world

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A crossbreed of CCG and roguelike dungeon-crawling

EXPECT TO PAY
£11.40

DEVELOPER
Terry Cavanagh

PUBLISHER
Terry Cavanagh

REVIEWED ON
i5 6500, RTX 2080 TI,
32GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
diceydungeons.com

for ten seconds in *Super Hexagon* feel like a once-in-a-lifetime feat of skill. Nevertheless, with the boss roasted and a new character for the taking, it's back to the dungeons for a series of ever-escalating challenges.

There's a deceptively massive chunk of game here, and if the likes of *Hearthstone* or *Gwent* never clicked with you it's an easy way to slide into the world of agonising over deck builds. You only have space for a handful of cards here but striking the right balance is just as engrossing.

DOUBLE SIXES

Like an over-eager Tinder date, the vibe is very much casual and lighthearted at first but before too long you're made aware that the expectation is absolutely that of a long-term prospect. Unlike a stranger you swiped right on, *Dicey Dungeons* doesn't keep liking your Instagram posts months after you stop playing.

And, to jettison that analogy entirely before it's stretched well beyond its elastic limit, it does a surprisingly good job of world-building. When you fight a Baby Squid, its attacks involve squirting ink which blinds you to some of your dice. Hedgehogs use a lot of spikes. The aforementioned Loud Bird uses sound to its advantage. All via the medium of dice rolls, but it's easy to be pulled into the surreal '90s cartoon-like world just the same.

Longer term play is limited by the absence of multiplayer, but as a slice of solo deck-building *Dicey Dungeons* is surprisingly engrossing, not to mention buoyed by great art and presentation. I do feel that faint itch to just load up *Gwent* and tend to my decks there, but conversely, *Gwent* doesn't look anywhere near as much like Ren & Stimpy as this. ■

DIE CAST

Major players in Dicey Dungeons



JESTER
Irritatingly chipper host, and a bit sadistic. Kill Jester.



LADY LUCK
Also a bit sadistic, but wears it better than her co-star.



THIEF
Unlock him for low-damage but high-tinkering.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

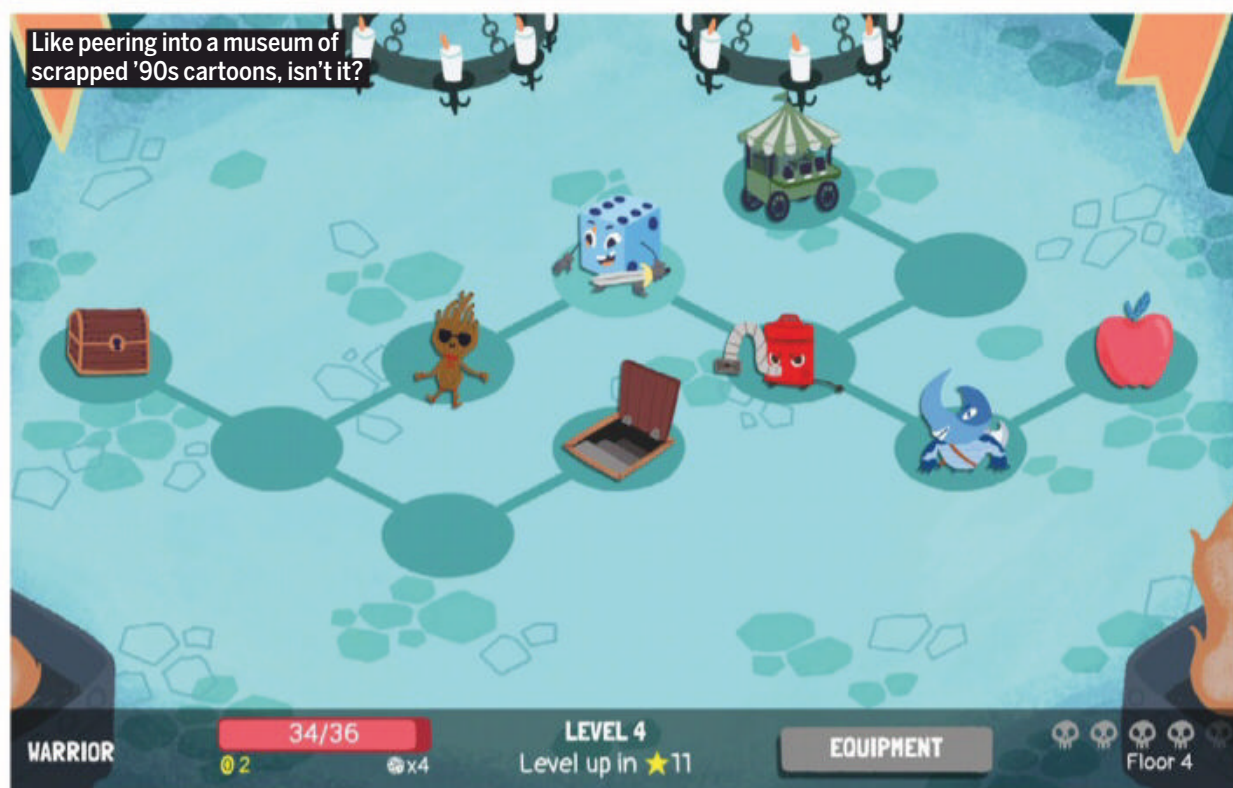
Dicey Dungeons is endearing, compulsive, and just weird enough to keep you wanting to explore its world.

81

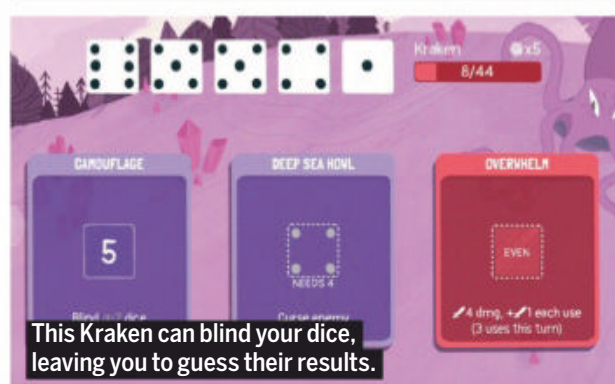
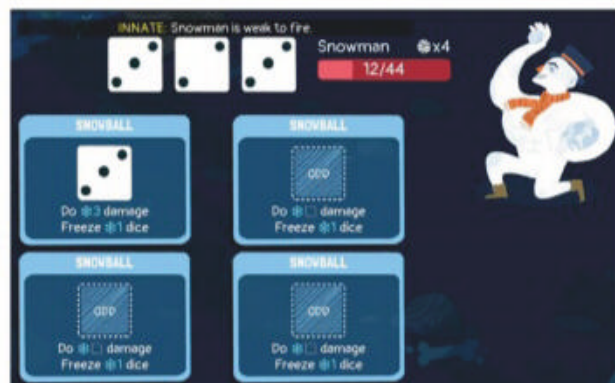
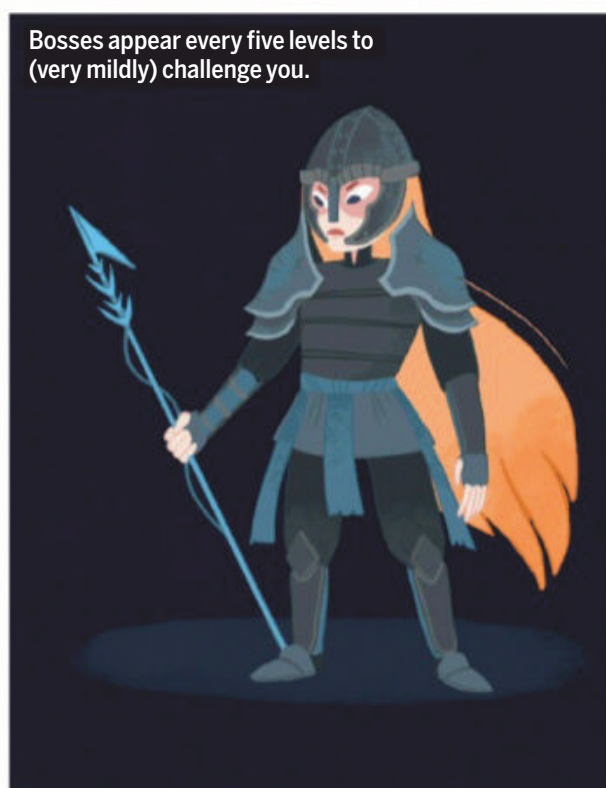
See? Just like Yahtzee.
If you squint.



Like peering into a museum of
scrapped '90s cartoons, isn't it?



Bosses appear every five levels to
(very mildly) challenge you.



This Kraken can blind your dice,
leaving you to guess their results.



The detestable Loud Bird.
This will be a long fight.

TOUR DE PENFURZY

KNIGHTS AND BIKES is a game of childlike curiosity and friendship. *By Richard Wakeling*

If your childhood was anything like mine, you would've spent an inordinate amount of time riding a bicycle. I rode my bike into town to trade in games at an indie game store, cycled over to a nearby field to play football with my mates, and generally just rode my bike to ride my bike. I would peddle for miles because... well, what better way to spend time with your friends, away from the prying eyes of parents and other adults?

Knights And Bikes taps into this childhood nostalgia with a charming cooperative adventure about a burgeoning friendship that also happens to include knights, bikes, curses, buried treasure, a goose named Honkers, and eating scones with cream on top and jam on the bottom.

It takes place on the fictional British island of Penfurzy, which is based on the actual British county of Cornwall, located on the rugged southwestern tip of the English coast. Anyone who's been to an English seaside town will feel right at home in Penfurzy, what with all the pasty shops, caravan parks, and flocks of seagulls looking to snatch your chips.

If you have no idea what I'm talking about, fear not, *Knights And Bikes*' evocative art style will effortlessly draw you into its vibrant world. The lovingly hand-painted art design is reminiscent of Media Molecule's *Tearaway* in some aspects – which makes sense when you consider one of its creators worked at the famed British studio. Characters are seemingly made from paper cutouts, and there's a tangible sense that a child's fingerprints are imprinted in each brush of paint and scribble of crayon without it ever coming across like an adult's poor imitation of a child's drawings.

The wild imaginations of protagonist's Demelza and Nessa are reflected in their surroundings by this expressive art style, and this informs parts of the story as well. Demelza is a native of Penfurzy whereas Nessa initially sets foot on the island at the

beginning of the game. The pair quickly strike up a friendship despite their differences, embarking on an adventure revolving around ancient knights, a terrifying curse, and the hidden treasure any good escapade

needs to propel it forwards. Yet the real heart of the narrative resides in the two girls' growing bond. *Knights And Bikes* tells a heartfelt tale that's wonderfully written, touching on subjects such as family, grief,

the concept of home, and how each of these affect the girls' relationship.

Sometimes it's obvious when the pair's fantasy world bleeds into reality, like when a hastily drawn dragon is overlaid on a car crusher. But the curse, and whether it's real or just part of the girl's vivid imaginations, is left ambiguous. What this does mean, however, is that there are plenty of enemies to fight. The curse in question transforms everyday objects into sentient beings,

The real heart of the narrative resides in the two girls' growing bond

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A cooperative action adventure

EXPECT TO PAY

£15.49

DEVELOPER

Foam Sword

PUBLISHER

Double Fine

REVIEWED ON

GTX 1060, Intel i3 8100, 8GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

One to two player co-op.

LINK

www.foamswordgames.com

mobilising golf balls, foam swords, and spooky gloves. Demelza and Nessa each have their own pedestrian arsenal of items to fend off the approaching horde of mundanity. There are straightforward weapons like frisbees, water balloons, and a toilet plunger, but things get more fantastical later on when you're able to utilise the sonic power of a boombox or the mystical properties of a faux Nintendo Power Glove.

Being a co-op game, there's also synergy between both character's items. For instance, any puddles Nessa creates can be electrified by Demelza's Power Glove to shock enemies or create electric links to solve puzzles. (If you're playing alone, the AI can more than handle itself.)

DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

Outside of combat you'll spend a fair amount of time traversing Penfurzy on bikes. You can customise them with things like sparkly streamers and gold reflectors to add some flash. There are also upgrades like a sporty mudguard that allow access to previously inaccessible areas.

The only problems with *Knights and Bikes* stem from its eight hour playtime. Combat is uncomplicated yet fun, but it doesn't evolve enough to remain engaging throughout. There's also a moment where it feels like it reaches a conclusion only to drag on for another 45 minutes.

Despite these issues, it's clear why Double Fine decided to publish *Knights And Bikes*. It's a perfect fit among the studio's own output, telling a well-written tale with a beautiful art style.

It's worth it for the story alone, but unlike my childhood bike rides, the journey to the end isn't as riveting as it could've been. ■

STRANGER THINGS

Everything '80s about Knights And Bikes

- Inspired by The Goonies
- Boomboxes
- Cassette tapes
- A Power Glove
- CRT TVs
- Synth music
- Laser tag
- Kids given free rein to wander off



PC GAMER VERDICT

Knights And Bikes tells a touching, albeit overlong, coming-of-age story about friendship and grief.

78

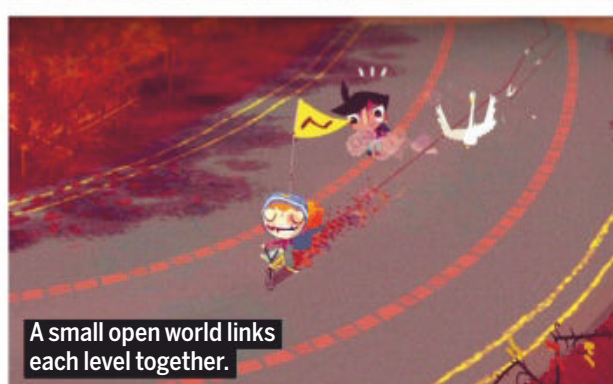
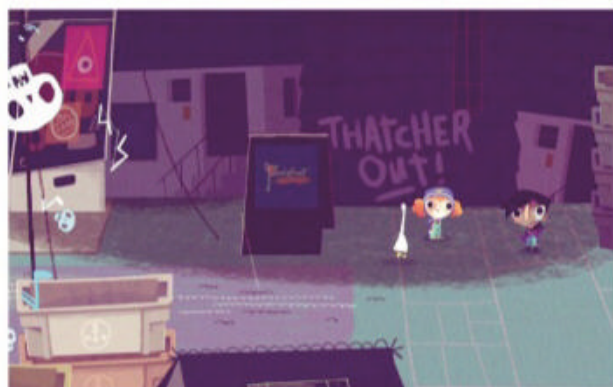
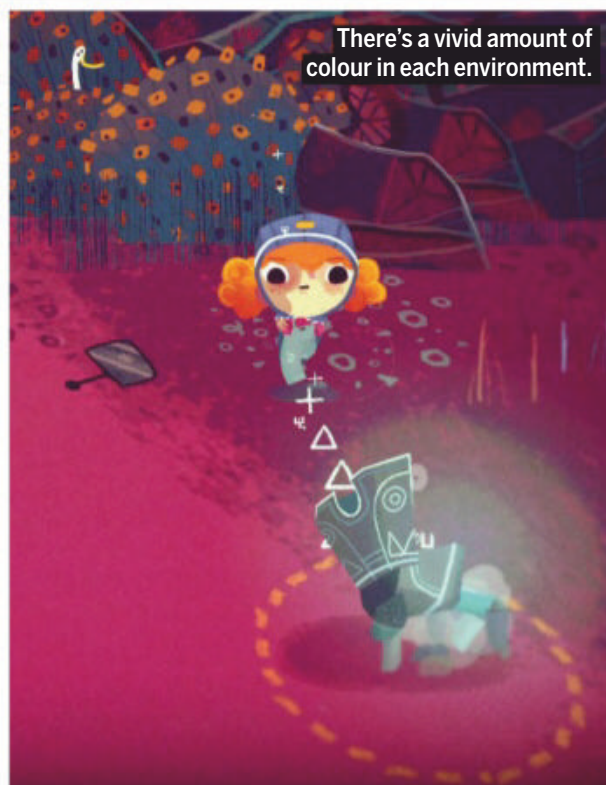
You'll explore a mini golf course, dilapidated theme park, and more.



You know you're in trouble with the tea cups come alive.



There's a vivid amount of colour in each environment.



A small open world links each level together.

Combat arenas can get hectic with all the projectiles.



BARE BONES

Fear both the living and the dead in **HUNT: SHOWDOWN**. By Anthony McGlynn

In this multiplayer shooter you don't win, you survive. After the tutorial, I was already on edge and sweaty. Nearly two-dozen hours later, I'm coming out of every round much the same, only with added exhilaration at my near-deaths, kills, and cleverly executed traps. Crytek's merging of survival horror and battle royale creates an intense FPS whose years in the making have produced a strong foundation, only let down by a current lack of content.

Hunt: Showdown is a swampland shoot-'em-up that blends bleak horror, wild west shootouts, and careful investigation together to produce something that's remarkably distinct. The basics are familiar – players choose a loadout, spawn on a marshy patch of dirt and vie for supremacy. The twist is you're not alone, as zombies and other ghouls prowl these knee-high lakes and abandoned cabins, and you're on a mission for one creature in particular. This is your bounty, and you have to gather mystical clues to find their location.

Set in an alternate history 1890s, a horrifying force is invading through inter-world rifts, infecting people and animals and turning them into terrifying mutants. Framed by centuries of mythology from multiple sources, the titular hunters are those who dabble in the dark arts and hunt for sport and research. The weaponry is crass and archaic: revolvers, single-shot rifles and crossbows, all

requiring manual reloads. Machetes and battle-axes are available, if you want to risk the intimacy, and makeshift bombs and bear-traps are handy in a bind.

My early forays are rough. At one point a demented canine chases me right into an Armored, a human-shaped thing with a tumorous outer shell, and in trying to escape I attract a group of hungry zombies and get promptly devoured. The immediate next

round, I meet a similar fate after successfully getting the first of three clues I need for the bounty.

Thankfully the perma-death is disabled until rank 15 so I don't lose all my loot – only my pride.

Gradually, I start to find my way, and understand *Hunt: Showdown's* allure. Bearing characteristics of a blend of *Fortnite* and *Silent Hill*, proficiency lies in harnessing skills inherent to both – the tenacity of a battle royale player combined with an intuition for desperate survival.

This inversion of the battle royale formula is simple but effective.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Multiplayer horror shooter set in late 1800s Louisiana

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Crytek

PUBLISHER
Crytek

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 1660,
Intel i5-4590 @ 3.3GHz,
8 GB Ram

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
www.huntshowdown.com

IN THE MUD

When you find the three clues, detectable using special vision called Dark Sight, you get the bounty's exact co-ordinates. Then, if you kill the target in a one-on-one, or two-on-one or three depending on your group, you have to get to an extraction point at the edge of the map for full completion. In *Hunt: Showdown*, winning is escaping.

This inversion of the standard battle royale formula is simple but deeply effective. It changes the whole complexion. Encounters against other players are more tactile, sometimes coming with unspoken agreements. I help a struggling rival kill a Hive – poisonous wretch – and after we just stare at each other briefly and part ways.

Up to three players can enter together. I mostly play solo – in-game communication is limited and I prefer not having to worry about or rely on anyone. Alone, I can slip by shoot-outs with relative ease, letting opponents wear themselves out. The mix of mossy quagmire, high-grass forest and timber village allows a variety of approaches once you figure out the landscape.

Hunt: Showdown's biggest issue is that, by the time you've orientated yourself to the bayou's hideouts and passageways and found a groove with your roster of hunters, a grind sets in quick. The two swampy maps get repetitive, as does the short list of weapons and three available bounties. After a time the only substantial unlockables are lore, which isn't enough to sustain my interest. It all just feels a bit lacking, especially given the price-point. That said, new options, including a second map, are in the pipeline, and I'm willing to get back on the hunt once they arrive. ■

MONSTERS INC.

Excerpts from *Hunt: Showdown's Book of Monsters*



IMMOLATOR

The smallest movement sends him into rage, attacking chaotically, and when shot he burns hotter and charges like a bull.



MEATHEAD

The leeches seem to act as the creature's sensory organs, allowing him to see and to weaken prey with poisonous bites.



WATER DEVIL

It would be easy to mistake it for one many-tentacled creature – the Water Devil is in fact a swarm of small aquatic animals.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Hunt: Showdown is a clever, hard-nosed FPS that doesn't have enough substance to be truly essential.

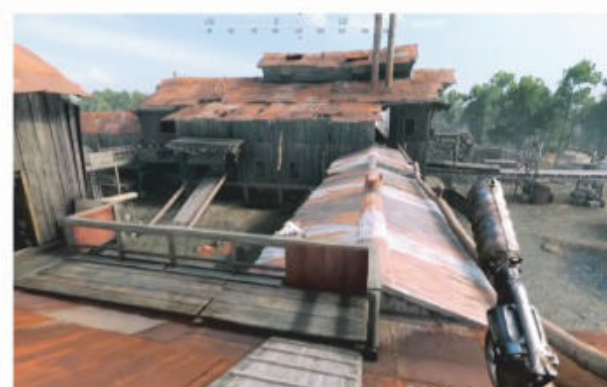
74



Even the shambling zombie grunts can pose a real threat in a swarm.



Every area of the map, known as compounds, has a different name.



Threats lie in all terrain in *Hunt: Showdown*.



BACK IN GRIND

Fifteen years later, **WORLD OF WARCRAFT CLASSIC** is still an epic adventure. *By Steven Messner*

Returning to *World of Warcraft's* original state is a humbling experience. With thousands of hours spent in Azeroth, I've defeated intergalactic demon armies and thwarted orc hordes from alternate timelines all while amassing the most powerful gear the universe has ever known. But *Classic* makes braving a cave filled with level 12 troggs feel like a massive achievement. It's not so much a nostalgia trip as it is a nostalgia fall into a pit of rusty razor blades. And you know what? I kind of like it that way.

Classic is a full recreation of *World of Warcraft* as it was at launch, or not long after – a sort of digital time machine that lives alongside the modern version. It's a gruelling and often frustrating experience, but it's also helped me rediscover why I loved *Warcraft* in the first place. For better and worse, this is *WoW* exactly as I remember playing it well over a decade ago – before expansions, like 2010's *Cataclysm*, streamlined entire game systems and forever changed Azeroth.

BETTER TOGETHER

Rose-tinted nostalgia can often be deceiving, but *Classic* proves that people are right to spend so much time fawning over that pivotal era of *WoW's* early years.

Experienced today, *Classic's* uncompromised vision feels endearing and rewarding, thanks largely to challenging combat that

necessitates social cooperation and flavourful RPG systems that make each class feel distinct.

That's a stark contrast to the latest expansion, *Battle for Azeroth*, where

I'm so powerful that I can accomplish almost everything alone except dungeons and raids that mandate I play with a group. Even then, I'm provided with tools to automatically match me with a group of strangers who

usually hail from other servers. Natural opportunities to make friends have become few and far between in that version of Azeroth, but they're everywhere in *Classic*.

The trade-off is that *Classic* is an enormous investment of time with no guaranteed reward. I can spend an hour searching for a group to run a dungeon, only to have everything fall apart if our team can't coordinate properly. But I actually prefer just how intimidating this *Classic* version of Azeroth feels. There's a renewed

I prefer how intimidating this *Classic* version of Azeroth feels

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A special set of servers that emulate 2006-era *World of Warcraft*

EXPECT TO PAY

£10/month (included for free in a regular *WoW* subscription)

DEVELOPER

Blizzard Entertainment

PUBLISHER

Blizzard Entertainment

REVIEWED ON

i7-7700, Nvidia RTX 2070, 16 GB RAM, 500GB SSD

MULTIPLAYER

MMO

LINK

worldofwarcraft.com

sense of danger and adventure to zones that I've already spent hundreds of hours exploring, and it requires that I pay attention to my surroundings at all times unless I want to become dinner to a family of panthers. It makes Azeroth feel new again. I rarely feel like I'm on autopilot while I'm playing – except during those occasional 20-minute hikes to nearby zones.

It's just a shame that questing in *Classic* is such hot garbage. It's the best source of experience points, but many zones have too few quests and they all feel like enormous chores. Killing 12 boars in an open field isn't all that fun, especially when the drop rate on the item needed for the quest is cruelly low. Times like these make me wish I was my level 120 demon hunter so I could round up dozens of boars and slaughter them all at once.

Though I like how challenging *Classic* is, there are definitely times when it feels downright unfair. Quests that involve braving monster-filled caves are a nightmare unless you have a friend to help because the enemy density is often too high, making it easy to pull a pack of gnolls by accident. It's such slow going that sometimes by the time I reach my objective, all the enemies have respawned behind me.

I have often died right next to an enemy so that when I resurrect it'll immediately attack me again and kill me. My only option in these moments is to continually run back to my corpse from the graveyard and resurrect and run for the exit. Rinse and repeat until I'm safe.

Though this oppressive danger can suck if I'm all alone, it emphasises the need to group up with other players. In the 30 hours I've spent playing (not including the thousands I've spent in modern *WoW* and on private vanilla servers), I've had to join forces with countless people to stay alive. The slower pace of combat and the need to frequently take breaks to regenerate mana or health in-between battles creates

ON SPEC *Classic brings back skill trees – here's the mage's*

1 IMPROVED ARCANES MISSILES

Gives you 100 per cent chance to avoid interruption when using Arcane Missiles

2 ARCANES RESILIENCE

Increases your armor by an amount equal to 50 per cent of your intellect.



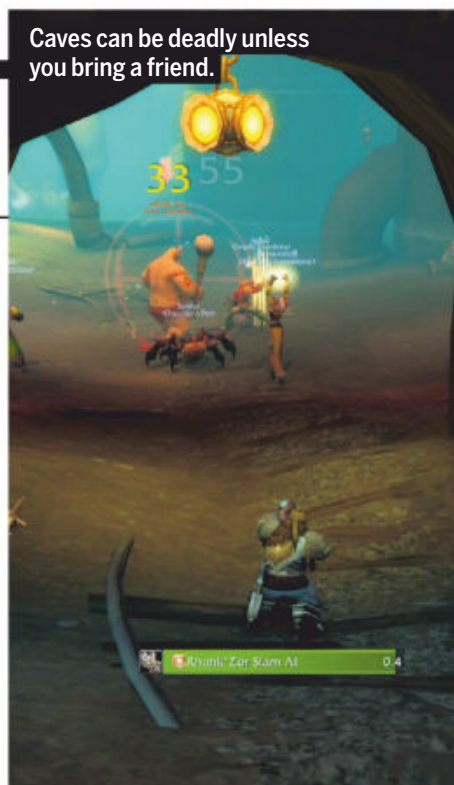
3 ICE SHARDS

Increases the critical strike damage of your Frost spells by 100 per cent.

4 ICE BARRIER

Instantly shields you, absorbing damage. Lasts 1 min. While the shield holds spells will not be interrupted.

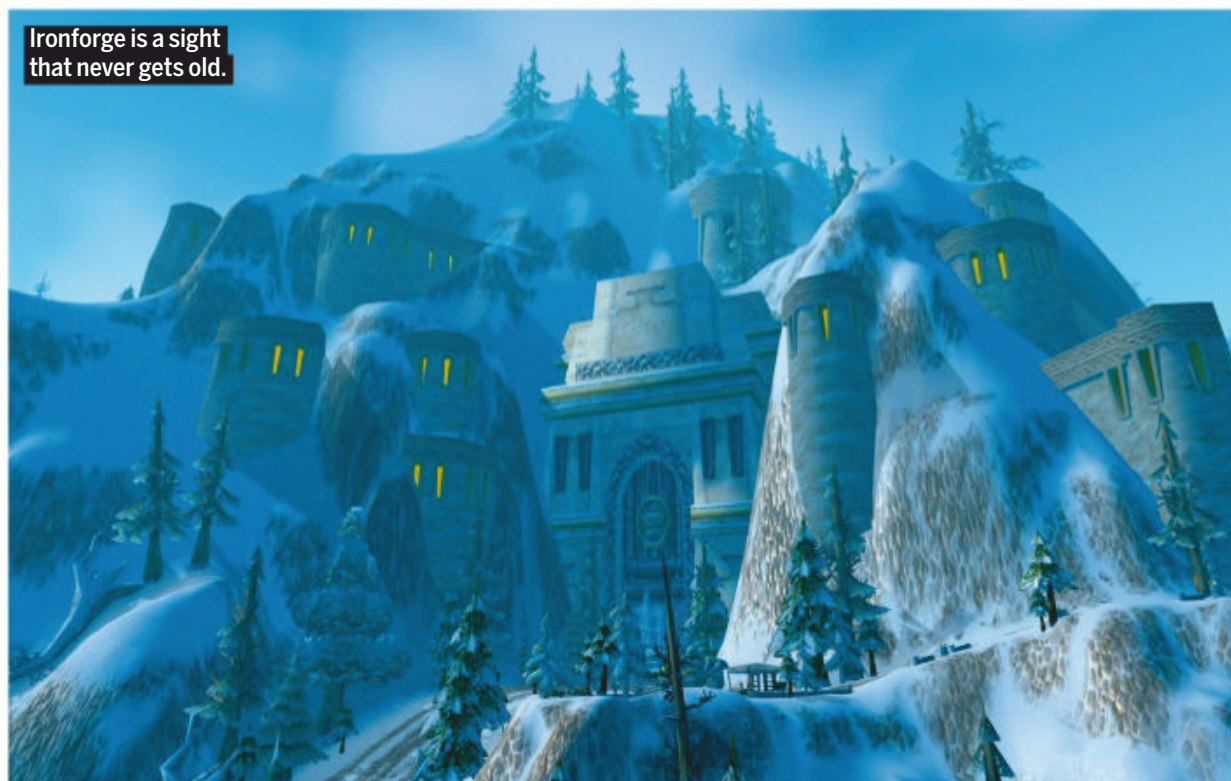
Caves can be deadly unless you bring a friend.



Other players are eager to chat if you say hi.



Ironforge is a sight that never gets old.



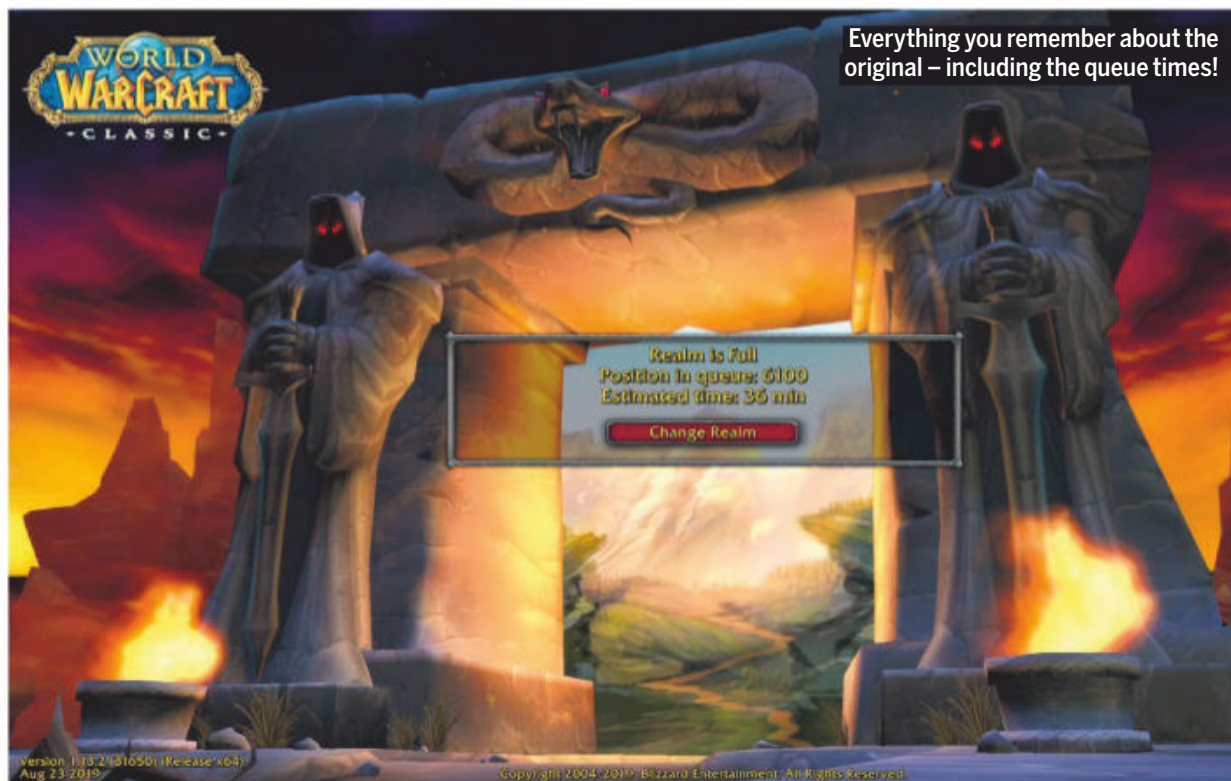
Major cities like Stormwind are bustling with life again.



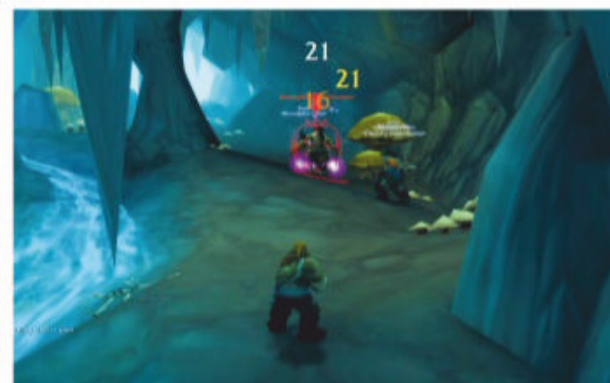
Where is everybody?



You're not going anywhere fast, even with wings.



Everything you remember about the original – including the queue times!



» welcome pockets of conversation that frequently turn into meaningful relationships. It's how I found a guild and more than a couple of new entries on my friends list.

My first time entering the Deadmines, for example, was with a group of chatty players who all belonged to a single guild. More than once we accidentally pulled too many enemies into a fight and had to scramble to stay alive. Instead of getting frustrated or looking to lay blame, these moments were frantic and hilarious. Just after we defeat the final boss, our party is entirely dead save for me and our wounded rogue who's being chased by a pirate while screaming for me to shoot it – only I've just run out of ammo and am currently helpless. It's like a chase scene from *Scooby Doo* as I frantically try to get this enemy's attention and save my teammate.

It's not that these moments don't happen in modern *Warcraft*, but I often feel like that version encourages people to focus too much on the rewards and destination.

Players want to avoid speed bumps at all costs just to check a box on a list of chores and move on. But *Classic*'s indomitable grind (it will take hundreds of hours to reach level 60) and slow combat encourages me to relax and enjoy the journey because I know I'm not getting anywhere quickly.

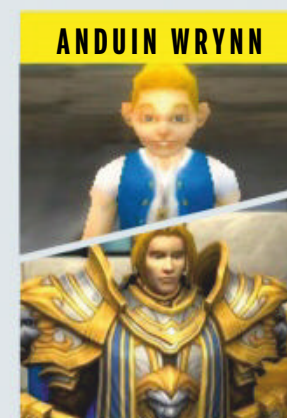
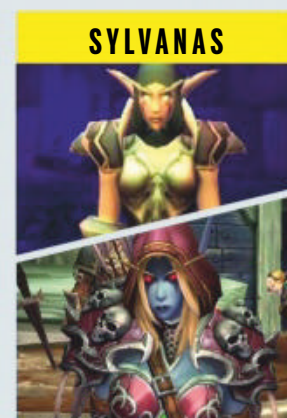
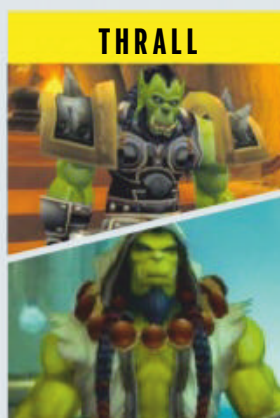
The result is a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. Players like me return to play *WoW Classic* hoping to relive those nostalgic

memories. That makes us willing to socialise with strangers and just enjoy the moment-to-moment play, which ends up manifesting our desired experience.

Being a part of this weird second zeitgeist is what's made my return to *Classic* so magical. The infamous Barrens chat is back to its usual filthy nonsense, Hillsbrad Foothills is a bloodbath of open-world PVP, and major cities are often full of players offering to weave cloth bags to expand players' inventory space at no extra charge. Playing *Classic* is like participating in a medieval fair or civil war reenactment – only this time we're collectively roleplaying what it felt like to first discover *World of Warcraft* 15 years ago when the internet wasn't shit.

EXTREME MAKEOVER *You've changed... since 2004*

15 years can change a person. Over the course of *World of Warcraft*'s long lifespan, Blizzard has a number of times taken opportunities to update the look of its most iconic characters. *Classic* features their original models – and encountering them can be quite the blast from the past.



In an era where games are constantly evolving and never looking back, it's almost impossible to get a chance to replay a version of a game as it existed in a specific moment in time. But, to me, *WoW Classic* is more than just a new version of an iconic game, it feels like a window to a time where interacting with people online still felt novel and exciting. And all the positive and enthusiastic encounters I've had so far tell me other people feel the same.

SLOG OF WAR

Even if the community and social aspects are fun, I do have to warn you that there many punishing parts of

Classic that I had forgotten about. When I die in a dungeon, for example, I don't start at the beginning like I do in modern *WoW* but all the way at the nearest graveyard outside. It turns a 30 second run back to my body to one

that can exceed three minutes – an infuriating trek if my group is struggling with a boss.

Mounts also aren't available until level 40, making any long-distance trip across Azeroth a boring slog, and it's annoying how frequently I have to travel back to major cities to pick up new class abilities every level.

These rough edges, along with the awful quest system, really scrape and bruise, but they're each an inseparable part of what made *World of Warcraft* the phenomenon it eventually became – a once-bizarre and mostly bloated MMO that has little to no respect for my free time but is capable of forging relationships within its crucible.

Compared to modern *WoW*, which desperately strives to be

constantly fun and convenient, I prefer *Classic* – at least for now.

The enduring genius of *WoW Classic*'s design (shared by other MMOs like *EVE Online*) is that it's okay to frustrate and piss players off every now and again. It's what initially helped *WoW* transcend from mere game to something altogether different. No grand adventure is always sunshine and rainbows, and if I get deep into a dungeon and forgot to bring enough ammo, the only person to blame is myself. But, instead, Blizzard years later decided that ammo was sometimes frustrating and therefore bad and removed it altogether along with a long list of other busywork players had to occupy themselves with.

CLASS ACT

Comparisons between *Classic* and *Battle for Azeroth* are inevitable, but I'm just glad I can make the choice and that both versions of *Warcraft* now coexist alongside one another. Compared to its modern version, *Classic* is weird, janky, and weighed down with the fat of useless abilities and systems like my hunter having to continually feed his pet snacks to keep it happy. But it's these sometimes haphazard, cumbersome mechanics that give *Classic* so much character and flavour.

World of Warcraft Classic is still the exact same MMO I remembered losing so many nights to as a teenager, and 15 years later returning to it is as fun and as frustrating as I'd hoped it would be. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

WoW Classic's uncanny ability to bring players together and immerse them in adventure hasn't aged a day at all.

80

Playing *Classic* is like participating in a medieval fair

BOGUS JOURNEY

Neon flair can't make up for **RAD**'s painfully average action. *By Natalie Clayton*

Are you sick of the '80s yet? We're in a peak cultural flashback. Bad clothes are back, baby, and everyone's trying to be the kid with the wildest leather jacket. *Rad*, Double Fine's post-apocalyptic mutant-basher, is no poser. This kid's deeply in love with the decade of loud hair and louder guitars. They've done their homework, for sure. Thing is, I'm kinda sick of the '80s. I kinda wish that passion went into making *Rad* a better game.

Fortunately, these are some good '80s. Double Fine has poured lavish detail into every synthesised riff. Every sunset in the background is a neon CRT wonder, every bark of the narrator a gruff, biting commentary. Vendors will lavish you in free gear for landing a sick 720. It's the Goonies meets Bill & Ted in an end-of-the-world adventure. Even for a sourpuss like me, it's lovely to look at.

It's the far future. We've wrapped up one apocalypse, but another hit us with a cheap shot. With the adults nowhere to be seen and mutants breaking down the walls, it's up to the off-brand Stranger Things kids to pick up their baseball bats and bash out a better tomorrow. Or die trying, over and over again.

Rad's taken some notes from *Nuclear Throne*, my favourite one-of-these. Rather than picking up new tricks and tools from vendors or drops, you're mutating a new power every time you collect enough rads.

But unlike Vlambeer's run 'n gun, you're getting properly messed up by these mutations. Each comes with a horrifying animation of your kid writhing in pain, as some fresh hell grows out of your helpless form.

A few levels down, my arm's on fire. I've grown a cancerous pustule on my back, and I'm plopping it on the ground to shoot who-knows-what at wild muties. There's something particularly unsettling about giving

totally-not-Eleven a monstrous bug tail that births spider minions.

Unfortunately I've yet to see *Rad* go wild with what these mutations do. Sure it's awesome when my head bursts into a flaming skull or twists into a snake. But it's a bit naff when the game's really just deciding which flavour of projectile attack to give me. Flying's always nice, mind.

IRRITANT

You're more frequently finding or purchasing endo-mutations that give

Your swings are too slow for effective hit-and-run attacks

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Bash mutants until you become a mutant

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Double Fine Productions

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
AMD FX-4130, GTX 1060 6GB, 8GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
www.bandainamcoent.com/games/rad

you buffs like elemental immunity or better shop prices. Exo-mutations (the ones with the wacky visuals) only burst free on level-up, and you're limited to four per run. Endos are bland, but they're often ultimately more useful and aren't as limited.

The thing is, you really need those mutations to be good. Roguelikes often suffer from feeling a little anaemic in the early-game, but *Rad* takes the cake. You're sluggish, you swagger. You need to get up close and personal, but your swings are too slow for effective hit-and-run attacks.

I've been dealt a killing blow from foes that drop fire upon death, because I couldn't drag my poor kid out in time. Frankly, hitting things feels rubbish in *Rad*.

It's a killer flaw, even as the game tries to shine. Encounter design is pitch perfect. Muties are varied and weird, each demanding a different approach. I've got to keep out of direct line of attack from these spike-faced rushing lads, while dodging fireballs and keeping away from those stomping big shell defenders. It's *Doom*, in the best way.

It's easy to see where Double Fine can crunch the numbers to make the early-game grind more effortless.

But that would still leave a serviceable-at-best roguelike. *Rad* is painfully style-over-substance, in love with its own look to a fault. It's not just cashing in on a fad – there's a genuine love for everything '80s that seeps into every fuzz-filtered sound and every crunchy pixel.

But there are so many games like this around right now. They're doing fantastic things with the genre, to boot. Unless you're screaming for a synth-tracked adventure, it's hard to recommend *Rad* over its more contemporary counterparts. ■

PICK YOUR POISON *If you're gonna survive the Fallow, you're gonna have to get funky with your form*



FLAMING SKULL

Think you're some kinda hothead, huh? Bowl your flaming skull, let's see you get all fired up.



RETURNY ARM

We didn't use high-tech wooden boomerangs back in my day. Real Aussies tear off their arms and chuck 'em.



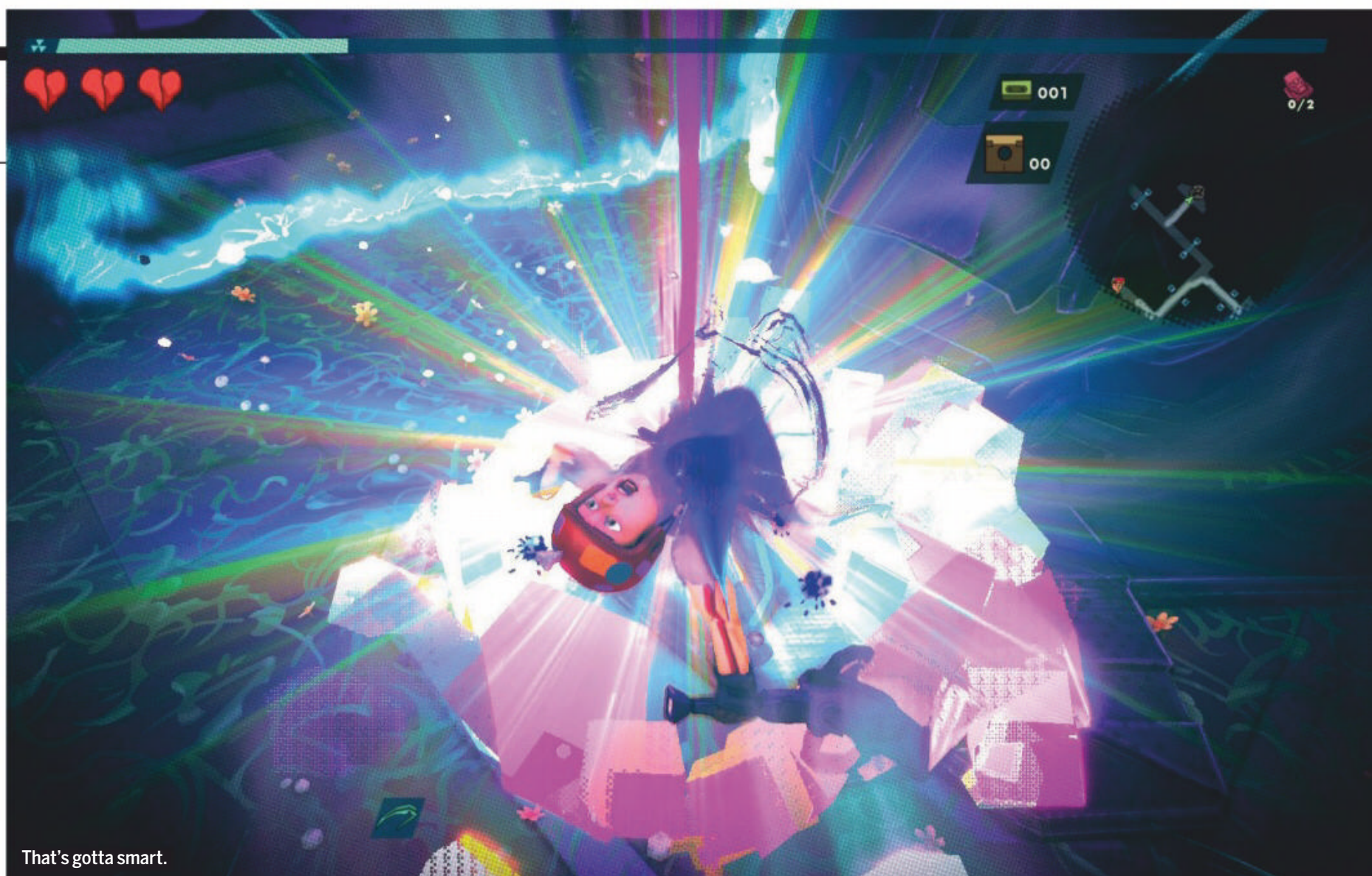
GREAT POINTS

Don't worry, this kid's not been impaled. He's just exercising his sharp wit with sharper appendages.

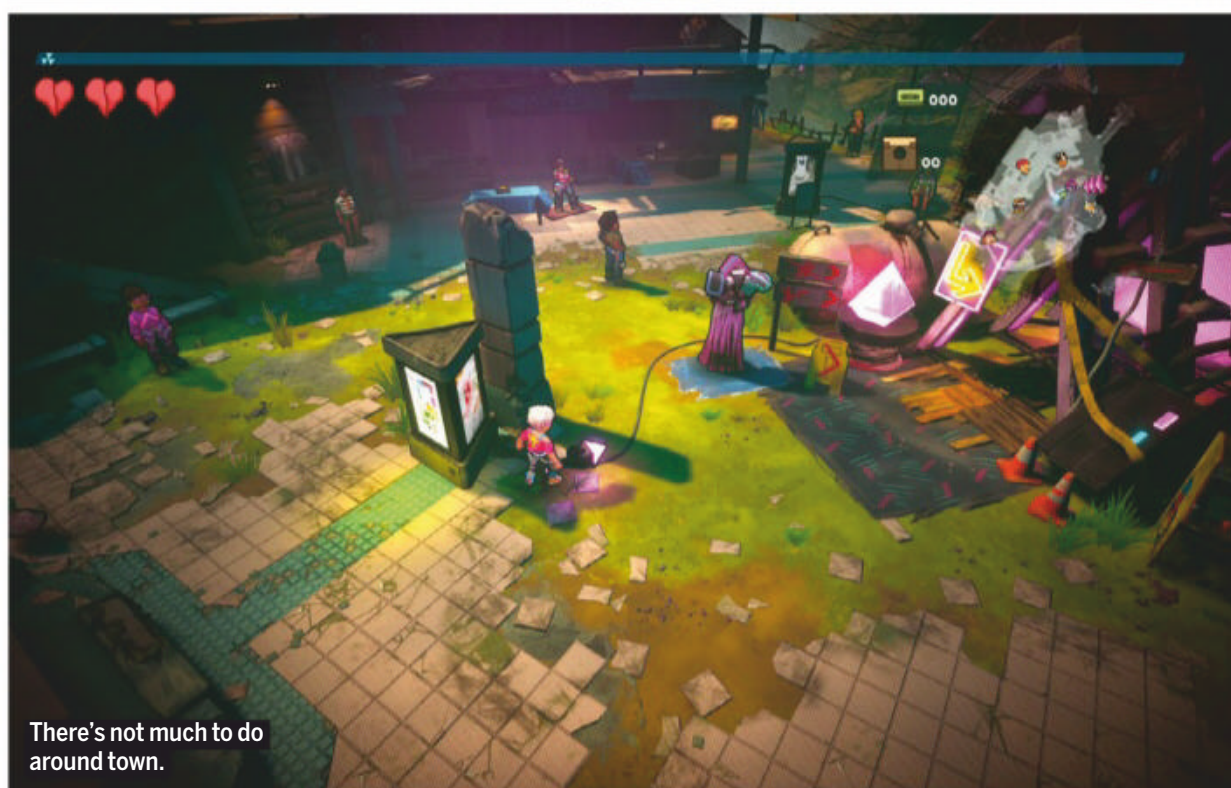
PC GAMER VERDICT

All the synths and mohawks in the world can't elevate this serviceable-at-best roguelike, unfortunately.

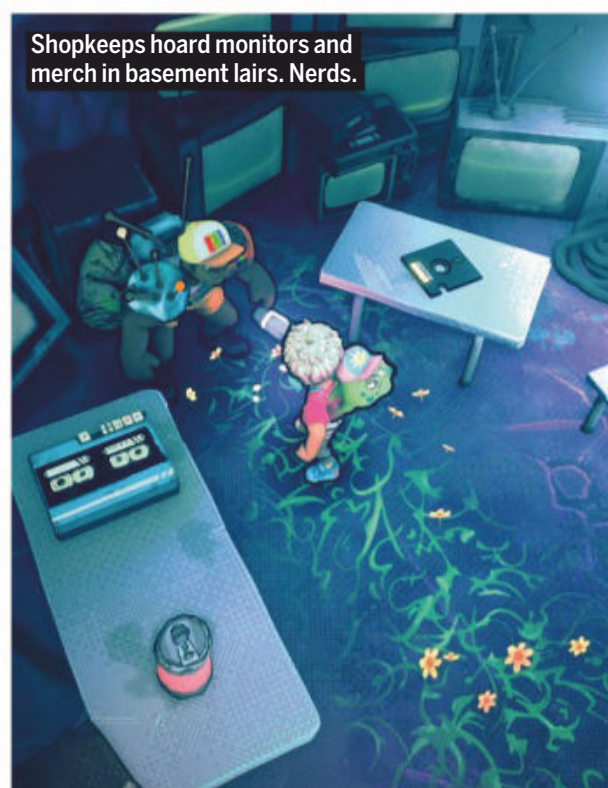
62



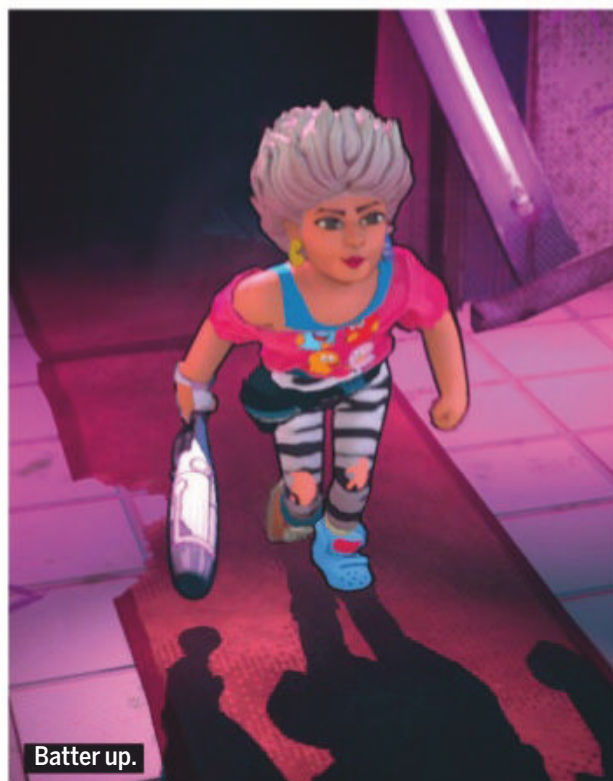
That's gotta smart.



There's not much to do around town.



Shopkeepers hoard monitors and merch in basement lairs. Nerds.



Batter up.



Dare you enter the temple of the Blood Dragon?

A BUGGY-FULL MIND

Manage the head offices of a broken brain in **HEADSPUN**. By Robert Zak

The revival of FMV games has been fascinating to witness, in large part because today's takes on the genre are far more accomplished than the ultra-compressed blotchfests that typified its first wave in the '90s. From Sam Barlow's clever found-footage puzzlers to more traditional choice-driven adventures like *Late Shift* and *The Bunker*, there's plenty to show that, against all odds, live-action video has some artistic merit in videogames.

Headspun is another twist on the genre, casting you as the boss of Cortex, a company headquartered inside the mind of Theo, a man emerging from a five-week coma after a car accident. Theo's memories are scattered all over his subconscious, most of Cortex's employees are dead, and it's up to you, CEO Ted, to get his brain back in order. This manifests as a management game in which you rebuild the company, interposed with live-action video of Theo's convalescence in hospital.

Your avatar Ted symbolises the dour and often outright dickish side of Theo's psyche. Ted wakes up from his own coma to find Cortex in ruins following the accident, albeit kept in some semblance of order by his business partner Teddy, who represents Theo's creative, romantic side. The game progresses in 24-hour days, with time passing whenever you engage Theo in mini-games.

Your interactions with the live-action part of the game are through Cortex Control, the main room in Cortex where a screen shows you what's happening in Theo's hospital room each day through his eyes. Beyond the neurologist, who sticks to her role of nursing Theo back to health, the only significant character you interact with is Jack, Theo's estranged best friend who believes that the two of them have a chance of publishing their own comic series.

You spend most of the game playing mini-games for Neuro-Credits

HEAD WRECKING

It's a reasonably engaging story, as you cross-reference the things you're told in the live-action snippets with the information you piece together in Cortex's Memory Bank. Information surfaces about Theo's journey from aspiring comic-book artist to wanker banker, as well as details that make you doubt the veracity of Jack and

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A management game with FMV storytelling

EXPECT TO PAY
£10

DEVELOPER
Superstring

PUBLISHER
Wales Interactive

REVIEWED ON
GTX 1070, i7-6700HQ, 16GB RAM, SSD

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
headspun.co

Teddy's words. There's a nice escalation of mystery here, even if the big twist ultimately feels predictable and earnest (exacerbated by the rather stagey acting).

From Cortex Control, you also assign workers to sidequests, which usually involve rebuilding rooms in Cortex, researching new activities for Theo, or side-quests which clean up various parts of the building.

The live-action snippets are few and far between, meaning that you spend most of the game playing mini-games that build up Neuro-Credits, which you use to hire staff and rebuild rooms. The mini-games – basic maths, crosswords, timing challenges, and other forgettables – are repetitive and mundane.

The problem with the management aspect of the game is that by the time you've even built half the rooms, you'll probably have completed the bite-sized story, and there's really no reason to keep fixing Cortex up other than for the sake of mindless completionism. And it doesn't help that, for me, these sections were regularly disrupted by serious glitches, lending some unintended realism to the fragmented mindscape.

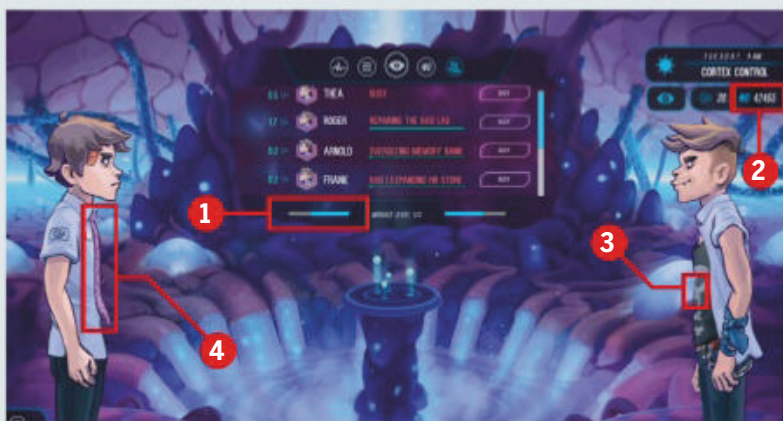
Headspun is a well-meaning attempt at exploring a fascinating topic. Wandering around rooms like the Dream Theater, you see some some vivid imagery, and are faced with interesting questions about memories and identity. But it never delves deeper, restricting you to tedious mini-games and base-building while you wait to see how story pans out. Even if I was to give it the benefit of doubt, and assume that its swarms of bugs will be squashed by the developer, *Headspun* fails to entrench itself in the memory. ■

GETTING A-HEAD IN BUSINESS

There are valuable lessons to learn from the corporate model at Cortex

1 A happy worker gets complacent, a deeply unhappy worker quits, so keep morale in the safe zone of 'moderately low' at all times.

2 Exploit your workforce to watch the money flow in while you diddle with weights in your office.



3 Bring in a meme-aware millennial archetype to act as the powerless 'face' of the company.

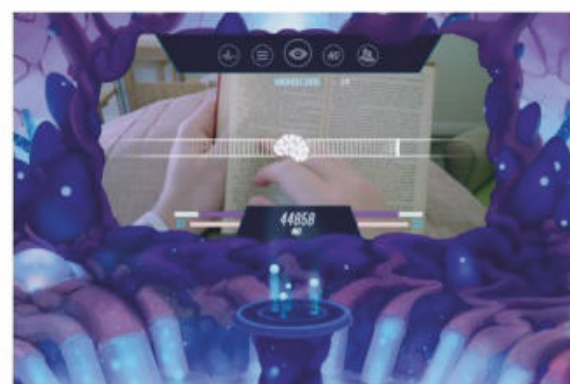
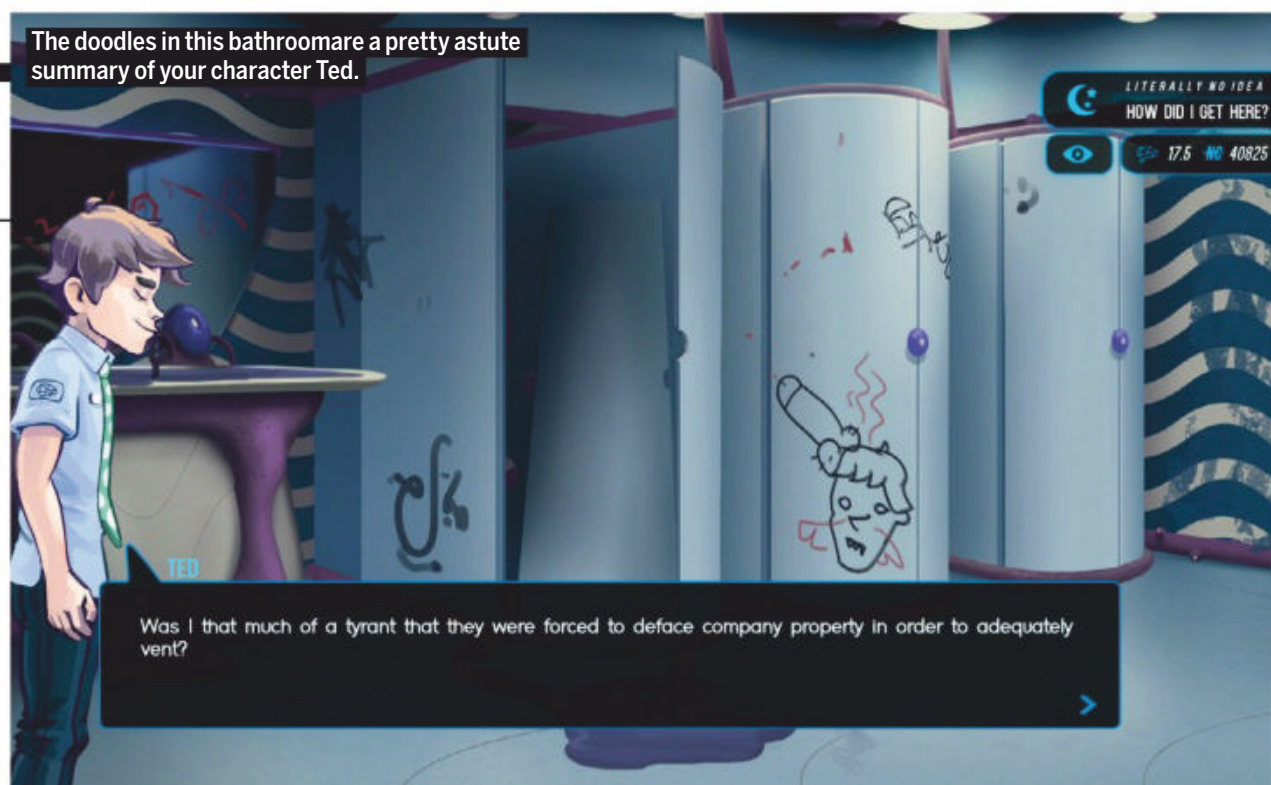
4 Wear a mildly flamboyant tie to show that despite being a tough tyrannical boss, you too have a 'wacky' side.

PC GAMER VERDICT

A high-minded effort and solid story undermined by bugs and braindead management mechanics.

54

The doodles in this bathroom are a pretty astute summary of your character Ted.



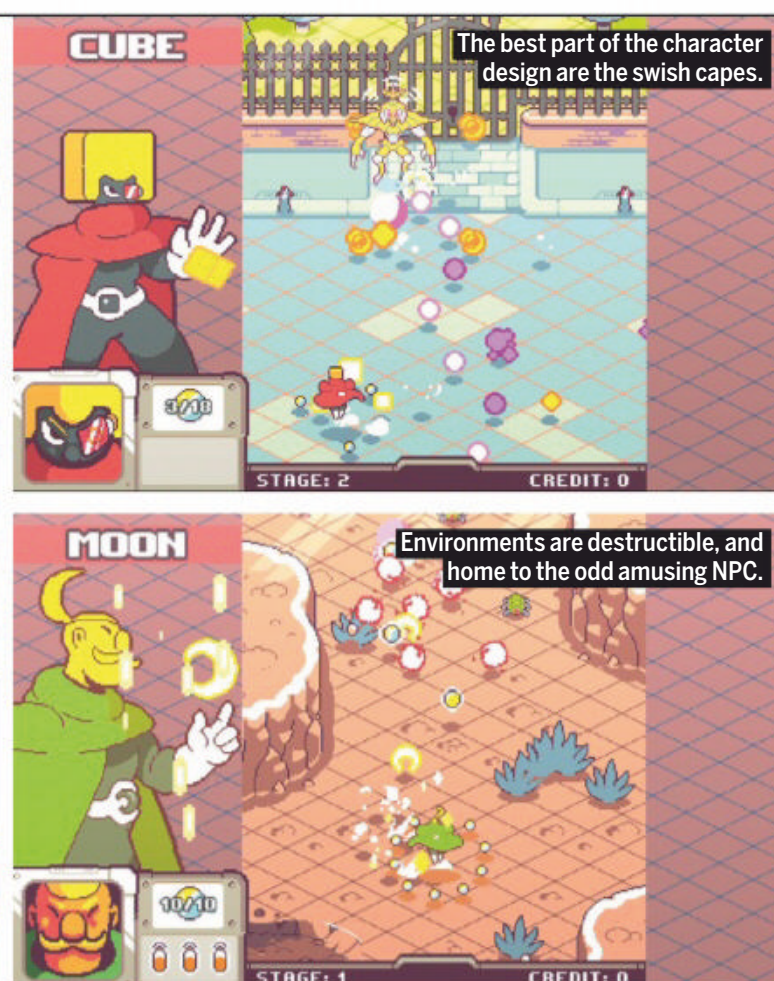
Theo's estranged best friend Jack unfurls the story, and offers up some intrigue.



Guardian Sphere



With the right upgrades, later stages are almost a cakewalk.



The best part of the character design are the swish capes.

Environments are destructible, and home to the odd amusing NPC.

SPHERE GRID

Blasting aliens into mush in colourful shmup **GUARDIAN SPHERE**. By Tom Sykes

There's a hint of *Sonic the Hedgehog* to this infectious shoot-'em-up, which was created for a recent game jam in which the theme was 'your life is currency'. Yep, you use your life bar to buy stuff, and it adds a satisfying risk-reward mechanic to what is otherwise an accomplished, but pretty traditional vertically-scrolling shooter.

You begin *Guardian Sphere* by selecting a robot (basically a ship) from a roster of stylishly drawn characters. Differences between each are scant, and basically amount to cosmetic changes, in addition to slightly varying bullet types. But it's nice to be given a choice, especially when death means having to begin the game again. You can even play co-op, with two guardians together on each stage.

The game plays similarly to any shmup you could name – you fight waves of enemies, before taking on a meaner boss at the end of every stage. It's bullet purgatory rather than bullet hell, however, requiring less godlike reflexes than most modern shoot-'em-ups, and offering a plethora of upgrades to make your journey that much safer. These are purchased from shops dotted around the

environments, with every upgrade permanently improving your guardian. You might buy homing bullets, for example, or a handy drone companion, or the ability to hold more spheres at a single time.

It's all to do with those spheres, which are a bit like Sonic's massive golden rings. You gather the colourful balls from defeated enemies, but if you get hit, you'll lose a certain amount. That's until you run out completely, and you're thrown back to the

menu with your robot tail between your legs. In shmup terms, it's pretty generous – but let's not forget the whole 'life as currency' thing.

Every upgrade and cache of secondary weapons chips away at your sphere total, with the better upgrades requiring huge chunks of your health. So, do you lower your health, in order to screw on some

It's bullet purgatory rather than bullet hell, however

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A vertical shoot-'em-up where you trade health for powerful upgrades

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Pixel-Boy, AAA

PUBLISHER
Pixel-Boy, AAA

REVIEWED ON
AMD A4-6300@3.7GHz,
6GB RAM, GeForce GT 610

MULTIPLAYER
1-2 offline

LINK
bit.ly/GuardianSphere

scrumptious upgrades, or do you hoard it for a hectic beating that may never come? It's a dynamic mainly of note during the early stages. If you survive the first three sections the rest of your run will proceed a lot more smoothly.

SHMUPPETS

Guardian Sphere is an odd shmup. You're not playing for points, as there aren't any, but merely to reach the end of the game. That's not to say it isn't replayable, as there are other characters to choose from, and other build types to try out, thanks to the vast range of upgrades on offer.

In many ways it feels like a roguelike, only without the brutal difficulty forcing you to replay until you eventually improve. I found it a little strange at first, ducking away during the involved shooting sections to leisurely browse the contents of a shop. But it was that character improvement, and extensive build variety, that kept me playing. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A manageable shmup with a strong central concept. Play this if you're looking for a way into the daunting genre.

79

MIRROR, MIRROR

Homeward in **AN ETERNITY, REFLECTING**. By Tom Sykes

Matt Frith has been making handsome little adventure games for years now. His latest is *An Eternity, Reflecting*, which puts you in the shoes – actually, the bare feet – of a woman returning to her parents’ home, to visit her estranged father after many years away.

Unusually for the genre, you don’t directly move the protagonist here. Instead, she’ll change position of her own accord, sitting on the couch as you examine it, or fiddling with the cassette player when you need to use it to play a tape.

Perhaps it’s a concession to the short development time (it was made in just two weeks, for a game jam), but it has the effect of making her feel more connected to her environment, thanks to a range of bespoke animations that blend seamlessly with the background of

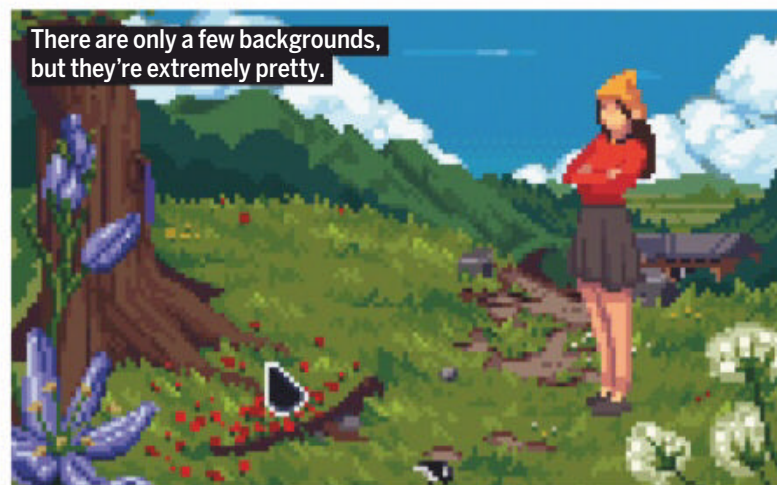
each screen. It’s a small world you’ll explore here, but one that feels cohesive, almost tactile with it.

The basic puzzles will feel familiar, and instantly soluble to experienced adventure game fans, but they’ll go through the motions anyway to see this heartfelt story through to its conclusion.

It’s a decidedly small-scale mystery, tasking you with figuring out why your father has been so distant all your life. Something you achieve, of course, by rummaging through his stuff.

There isn’t really enough here for that story to develop beyond a brief sketch, and really it’s the artwork that does most of the heavy lifting. This is a beautiful game, its elegant pixel art perfectly creating an image of peaceful, rural Japan that seems a lot bigger than the handful of screens the game takes place on. ■

77



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Matt Frith, Rob Potter

LINK
bit.ly/2ksdCbt

STEALING THRONES

Fight the battle in **WINTER FALLING**. By Tom Sykes

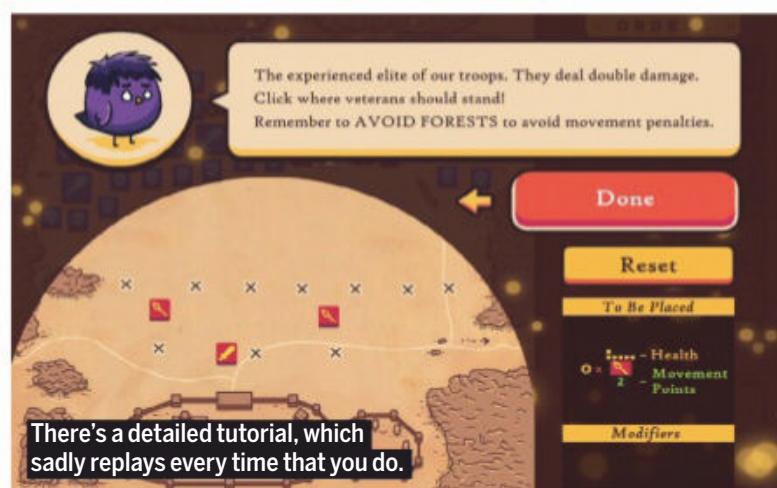
Game of Thrones’ Battle of Winterfell was a thrilling fantasy bust-up that had armchair strategists pulling their hair out, over the apparently dumb tactics involved. I say ‘apparently’, because I know very little about medieval battle strategy. Now I know a little more, thanks to this neat browser game that lets you redo the entire ruddy battle.

There are no Dothraki or giants here, as every unit type is represented by cute little icons on a tactical map, but it’s a cheekily similar situation to the battle present in the show. You’re attempting to preserve an important figure against a relentless hoard of undead enemies, and you do this by placing units at strategic positions, and by yelling out a few limited orders after the battle starts. These are powerful, but infrequent, requiring specific enemies to be taken

out first. But your most important decisions happen before fighting starts. Do you hide non-warriors inside the crypt, to improve morale, or make use of them during the battle? Where do you place your archers, your cavalry, your hero units? “So you hated the TV battle,” *Winter Falling* asks, “how exactly would you have done it differently?”

It turns out that surviving Winterfell is a lot harder than it looked in the show – the horde hits hard, and even slight adjustments to your troops can make a huge difference. While it’s essentially a joke browser game, with an attention-grabbing premise, it’s one that made me think hard about medieval battle tactics. The interface is easy to grok, and the situation tantalisingly bleak. You win or you die. Or, you die, and die, until you eventually win. ■

70



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Rarykos

LINK
rarykos.itch.io

THEY'RE BACK

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott



WEST END

No time to kill in the original **DEAD RISING**

If you want to start an argument on Twitter (and apparently, who doesn't?) try criticising the time mechanic in *Dead Rising*. It's a challenging design choice that makes it entirely possible to miss huge chunks of the story. And it's representative of a game that's fun to return to precisely because its systems are so bizarre. It's gently thrilling and unfamiliar, like finding foreign currency in a drawer.

The intro of *Dead Rising* is a legitimately great bit of storytelling. You take photos as you fly over tidy US town of Willamette: snaps of a small military blockade that escalate into scenes of full-blown devastation. By the time I reach the mall I'm desperate to get inside and start exploring. And I'd forgotten how much I love Frank West, too. It's nice to see such a lumpy hero – he's like a felt-pen drawing on an elbow.

The first weird, wonderful design choice I encounter is the amount of costume changes I can make even before I meet an NPC or kill a single zombie. I spend ten minutes trying on awful new outfits and get stuck dressed as a game show host because I can't find my original clothes. "Fantastic!" says Frank. Quite.

When I finally get into the mall, it's impossible to stay focussed. I'm

throwing saw blades at the undead and trying to remember where all the best gear is seconds after stepping foot inside. I ditch my cursed suit in favour of a child's t-shirt and shorts – an outfit that has no right to be in any game, ever, and yet here it is. The

When I finally get into the mall, it's impossible to stay focussed

mall is a genuinely incredible setting, and the thrill of being able to smash windows and steal hats apparently never subsides. But all the while, in the back of my mind, I'm conscious of the watch on my wrist and of time slipping away. Jelly down the temporal plughole.

My nostalgia-addled brain had, however, conveniently forgotten some issues. Speaking to the janitor Otis on the walkie talkie is like chatting with a dying nan – you have to wait for the text to scroll and there's no way to skip it. Plus, if you cut him off by doing anything

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

Arcane zombie action game starring a sentient pork knuckle

EXPECT TO PAY

£16

DEVELOPER

Capcom

PUBLISHER

Capcom

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i7-7700 CUP @ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

store.steampowered.com/app/427190/DEAD_RISING

whatsoever, he'll start again from the beginning. I deliberately hang up the very first time I speak to him – he might as well get used to it. And then there's aiming, which is an actual human rights violation. The first boss fight, against a man with a machine gun, is the game apologising for the horrors to come like a tired office manager explaining a bespoke invoicing system. "Yes, this really is how it works. You just get used to it."

STUPID SURVIVORS

Everything goes wrong in ways that would be unforgivable in modern games. I lose my NPC followers because they lag too far behind when I go through a door, one button seems to do everything and manual save points are miles apart. But in spite of this, I adore *Dead Rising*. All these mad systems knit together into something that really does feel unwieldy, unique, and apocalyptic. Who cares if I just lost two hours of progress? Not me, apparently. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

You're awful, *Dead Rising*. But I still love you. Not Otis though – he can go rot with the rest of the zombies.

70

TOWER DEFENCE

Admiring and fearing the sunsets in **DYING LIGHT**

Dying Light is the opposite of *Dead Rising* in one very specific way, in that it's a zombie game I remember being far worse than it is. It all felt very 70 per cent the first time around – like a seaside undead experience cobbled together in someone's living room – but there's a strong chance I'm merging it with *Dead Island*. Instead, I'm surprised by how dense and detailed and sporadically beautiful it is. There are tumbling shanty towns, wafting trees, and flocks of birds framing wistful sunsets. Even a viral outbreak can't ruin it. And the Tower, the hub location in which I begin the game, feels like a real place full of actual people.

It takes a while to get back into the flow of things. The parkour feels especially tricky. I stumble across the tutorial area and even manage to fall

to my death. I'm not especially enamoured by the undercover subplot, either. Every so often I have to follow a marker to a roof to make a call to my surly contact, and it stresses me out. I'm worried one of my new friends in the Tower will spot me, or I'll dial the wrong number while I'm burning essential military supplies.

Once I start to ignore the main story, though, *Dying Light* is incredible. The layout of the world is masterful – the perfectly-placed vehicles, ramps, and handholds should feel contrived, but they don't. Instead, my visit to Harran makes me think it's one of the most underrated locations in gaming. And in terms of raw horror, the day-night cycle is still horribly effective. Any game that can make me this afraid of zombies, the dark, and betraying strangers deserves praise. ■

85



God bless Techland for doing this.



At least I have my trusty pipe!!

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Techland

PUBLISHER
Techland Publishing

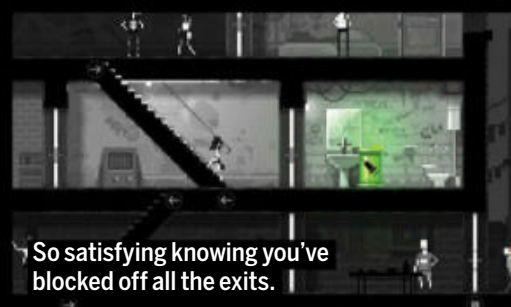


The best dead body burying mechanic in games.

PROJECT ZOMBOID

I always assumed I'd manage brilliantly in a zombie apocalypse scenario. *Project Zomboid* is here to tell me how wrong I am. This savage survival sim holds a mirror up to your inadequacies, proving that even a can of beans could defeat you if you don't have the tools. All the cooking, reading, and mood management elements make it feel like a festering version of *The Sims*, albeit one where Mortimer Goth has apparently been devoured and Bella is banging her rotting head against the toilet door. I could blame the shock of this for the fact I only last a few days, but it would be a lie. *Project Zomboid* scores extra points for being the first game to terrify me into learning carpentry. ■

78



So satisfying knowing you've blocked off all the exits.

ZOMBIE NIGHT TERROR

I'd love to get through this review without mentioning a certain game from Psygnosis, but let's save some time instead – this is *Lemmings* with corpses. The goal is to spread infection by using specialist tools to create more undead. The basic ones turn humans into zoms, and later mutations allow you to direct the horde or attack faster. As well as your basic task of eating humans, you have bonus goals, which keep me doing the same levels repeatedly. The aesthetic is wonderful, too – a pure John Carpenter score plays over utilitarian presentation punctuated with glowing greens and schlocky reds. Also, getting to be the zombies feels like catharsis after *Dead Rising*. ■

80



It's hard to get too enthusiastic about this.

CHECKPOINT

BEN AND ED

We've had some horrible zombies in this month's *They're Back*, so let's finish with a nice one. Here you play as Ed, a limber, athletic corpse who has to compete in a murderous game show to rescue his human friend, Ben. In practice, this means speedrunning a series of lethal assault courses, hopping, crawling, and rolling to the next checkpoint as Ed gets sliced up like a radish in an infomercial. It's silly, exhilarating fun, predicated on an enjoyably erratic physics engine. ■

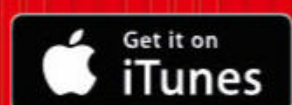
74

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magazine?

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PCGAMER.COM

HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE



100 GROUP TEST

SSDs to make load times nothing but a distant memory.



104 BUYER'S GUIDE

Get the best PC parts for your build, no matter your budget.

GROUP TEST

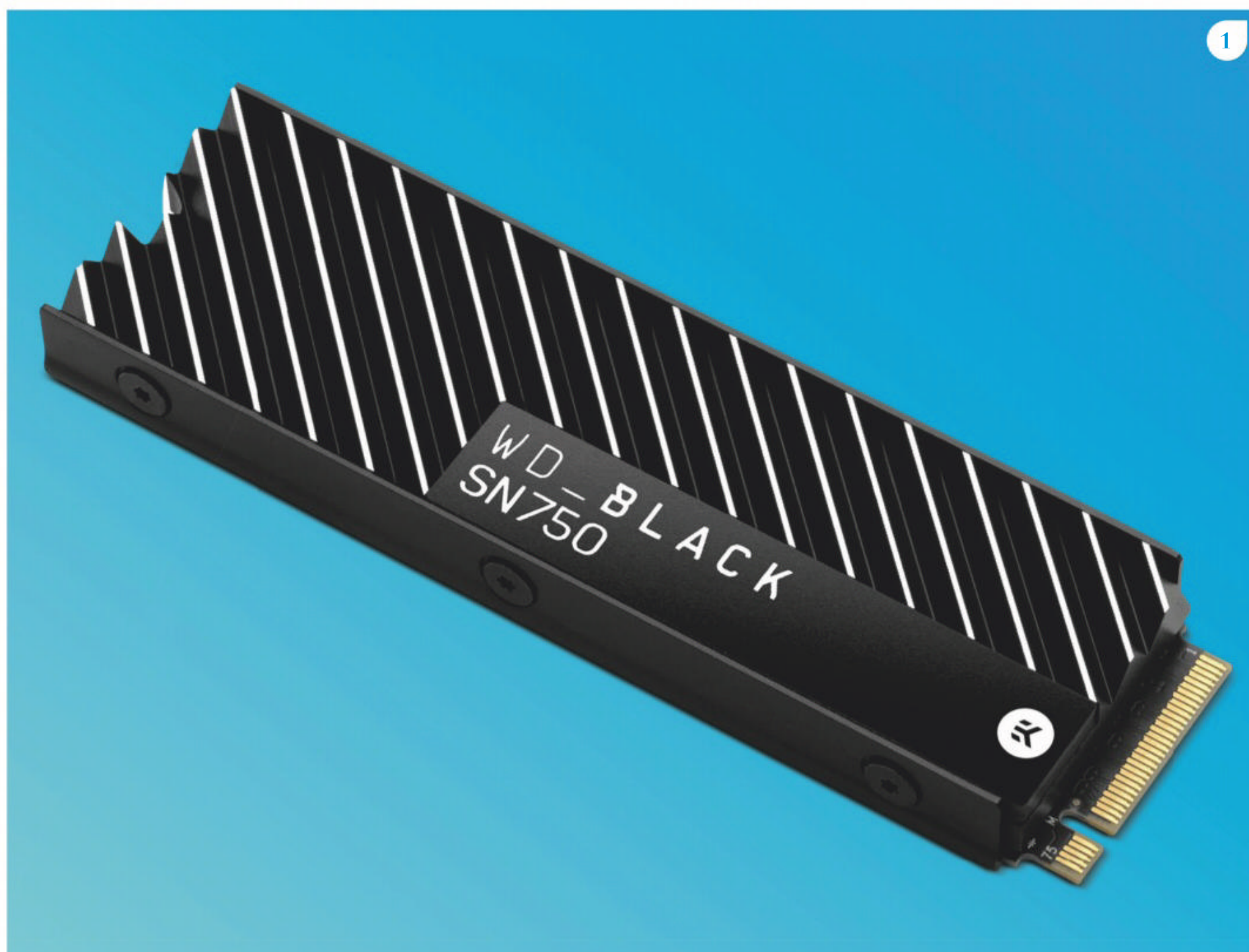
SOLID STATE DRIVES

Grab the best SSD for gaming and stop staring at boot and loading screens.

By Alan Bradley

SAMSUNG
Solid State Drive

As prices continue to drop, and even in some rare cases get close to parity with traditional HDDs, it's a great time to be shopping for the best SSD. If you're still living in the era of the platter hard drive, upgrading to an SSD (or even adding a smaller, less expensive unit as a boot drive) can hugely impact your PC experience. Not only will boot and load times shrink, but everything will feel snappier and more responsive. It's one of the easiest ways to make an older machine feel new again, and we've done the homework for you, testing a ton of drives to pick out the best of the best.



860 Evo 1TB

SAMSUNG £158

The best for gaming, balancing price and performance

1 If there's one company that tends to rule in the SSD market space, it's Samsung. The 850 Evo was a long-time favourite, which remains viable even today, but the 860 Evo line has largely displaced it. Samsung currently trades blows with Crucial for our top pick, depending on capacity and current prices, but both are excellent drives with proven reliability and performance. The 1TB 860 Evo hits the sweet spot for price and performance, but the higher capacity models are also worth a look, especially as they're relatively cheap and dropping in price.

These are great SATA drives, so you're unlikely to have compatibility issues. The newer 970 Samsung drives are great, if you're looking for an NVMe alternative, but they currently cost about 30-50 per cent more, so you really should consider whether you want to spend that money. For cost vs performance, this 860 Evo 1TB SATA really hits the sweet spot, and it's often reduced via Amazon or NewEgg.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ As fast as SATA gets
- ⊕ Proven Samsung reliability
- ⊖ SATA bottlenecks
- ⊖ Sometimes higher prices

SPECS CAPACITY: 1TB / **INTERFACE:** SATA 6GB/P/S / **SEQUENTIAL IO:** 550/520MB/S READ/WRITE / **RANDOM IO:** 98K/90K IOPS READ/WRITE / **ENDURANCE:** 300 TBW

WD Black SN750

WESTERN DIGITAL £52

The best SSD for gaming of the NVMe class

2 Western Digital has long been recognised for its role in the volatile spinning hard drive market, a space often ridiculed for the fundamental unreliability of the technology it bolsters. But the WD Black SN750 is proof the company can find success outside the rickety data storage hardware of yesteryear.

Though it's not without its faults, this M.2 form factor NVMe drive is an absolute speed demon, made even faster by an impressive Gaming Mode you can toggle on or off in the company's integrated SSD Dashboard software.

Of course, kicking it into overdrive also means cranking up the heat which, according to Western Digital, necessitates the use of a thermal heatsink to keep your computer running at an optimal speed.

Sold separately, the heatsink model is optional and sold at a premium, but the company claims its "passive cooling features" aid with ushering in "optimal levels of performance".

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Breakneck performance
- ⊕ Robust monitoring software
- ⊕ Designed for gaming
- ⊖ Heatsink doesn't come standard

SPECS CAPACITY: 250GB / **INTERFACE:** PCIe 8GB/S / **SEQUENTIAL IO:** 3,470/3,000MB/S READ/WRITE / **RANDOM IO:** 515/560K IOPS READ/WRITE / **ENDURANCE:** 600 TBW

GROUP TEST



THE MX500 IS ONE OF THE TOP PERFORMING SATA DRIVES

3

MX500 1TB

CRUCIAL £107

The best SSD for gaming among the SATA options

3 The ideal SSD for a gaming PC strikes a perfect price/performance/reliability balance, which is more difficult than it sounds. Crucial's MX500 is one of the few drives that really has no weak points, and with game install sizes getting larger, buying the biggest SSD you can afford is becoming increasingly important. The MX500 is one of the top performing SATA drives, and perhaps more important, it's one of the more affordable SSDs. It ends up delivering an incredible value, and the only way to get meaningfully faster results is to move to an NVMe drive.

Crucial's random IO read and write speeds are pretty much on a par with those found in the Samsung 860 EVO model, if a little less reliable in some of our tests, and given that the models retail for similar prices, there is a good case for claiming that Crucial's MX500 is in fact the best SSD you can get when it comes to dollar/GB value. But still it's one of the fastest we tested in this round.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ One of the fastest SATA drives
- ⊕ Competitive price per GB
- ⊖ Can't touch NVMe performance
- ⊖ 500GB model a bit expensive

SPECS CAPACITY: 1TB / INTERFACE: SATA 6GB/S / SEQUENTIAL IO: 560/510MB/S READ/WRITE / RANDOM IO: 95K/90K IOPS READ/WRITE / ENDURANCE: 360 TBW

860 Pro 1TB

SAMSUNG £215

The best SSD for gaming for speedy SATA performance

4 Do you want a fast SATA drive with the highest endurance around? If so, look no further than Samsung's 860 Pro line. It doesn't win every benchmark, mostly because of margin of error and the higher capacity 2TB and 4TB drives, but you can pound the drive with writes all day long without killing it. The five-year / 1,200TB warranty translates to more than 650GB written per day, every day, for five years. I'm not even sure what you'd be doing that would require that many writes per day, probably a server workload rather than anything you'd see on a desktop PC.

Given that it's dropped in price plenty over the past 18 months, you can easily pick up the larger models (between 2-4TB) for an almost-reasonable-amount of money. Sure, you could get an NVMe for that money, if a smaller one, but you get an awful lot of reliability with the Samsung SSDs. Unfortunately it does slow down as the drive fills up but by that point a newer and better model may be available.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Costs as much as a SATA SSD
- ⊕ Performance is still good
- ⊖ Slows down as the drive gets full
- ⊖ 1TB model hard to find

SPECS CAPACITY: 1TB / INTERFACE: SATA 6GB/S / SEQUENTIAL IO: 560/530MB/S READ/WRITE / RANDOM IO: 100K/90K IOPS READ/WRITE / ENDURANCE: 1,200 TBW

HOW WE TEST

SSDs make your whole system faster and more pleasant to use. But they matter for gaming, too. A fast-loading SSD can cut dozens of seconds off the load times of big games. An SSD won't normally affect framerates like your GPU or CPU, but it will make installing, booting and reloading in games a faster, smoother process.

To find the best gaming SSDs, we researched the SSD market, picked out the strongest contenders, and put them through their paces with a variety of benchmarking tools. We also put in the research to know what makes a great SSD great, beyond the numbers – including types of flash memory and controllers.

A LOOK INTO THE FUTURE

With SSDs becoming a better value, there's simply no reason not to have one in your PC. If you were an early adopter with a 128GB or 256GB drive and find that capacity is becoming a limitation, it's time to consider an upgrade. A 512GB SSD now costs a lot less than a 128GB model did a few years ago, and we strongly recommend at least 240GB for your OS.

In another ten years, solid state tech may make today's SATA SSDs look like floppies. For now, SATA SSDs offer the best value. Watch out for the next generation of NVMe offerings, with QLC models pushing into direct contention with SATA.



860 Evo 4TB

SAMSUNG £635

The best SSD that mixes capacity and performance

5 We're giving the 860 Evo a second shout out in this guide, to highlight the 4TB model.

It's currently the largest widely available (and still somewhat affordable) SSD around, priced at £635. Endurance is also an impressive 2,400TB, and performance is as fast as you can get with a SATA drive.

That's thanks to the high capacity, which will almost always have some ready to go NAND available for use, avoiding periodic slowdowns.

The prices of the Samsung drives have dropped significantly over the past year, so you can

pick up bigger units for almost half the price.

What we'd say about this one is that it's about as good as SATA gets, and while you're making a big investment with a 4TB model, you'll feel the effects. Perhaps dip into a quicker NVMe for booting and essential apps later in 2019 or early 2020 too.

At that price, though, it might be worth waiting to see if it turns up cheaper in a sale.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- + Faster than the lower capacity SSDs
- + Incredible endurance
- Higher price per GB
- SATA limitations

SPECS CAPACITY: 4TB / **INTERFACE:** SATA 6GBPS / **SEQUENTIAL IO:** 550/520MB/S READ/WRITE / **RANDOM IO:** 98K/90K IOPS READ/WRITE / **ENDURANCE:** 2,400 TBW

Enhanced Source 500GB

MUSHKIN £61

The best for those shopping on a budget

6 Mushkin just released a new Source line of SATA drives, which use 3D TLC NAND to help reach even lower prices.

The 500GB model currently sells for as little as £61, and the 1TB drive goes for about £115 – a significant saving over its nearest competitors.

While performance is relatively modest (the older Reactor beats the Source in several tests, including the overall metric), this is an easy upgrade for any budget system currently lacking an SSD.

Mushkin releases surprisingly reliable drives, for the price, so

you're getting an SSD that will perform for a good few years here. The manufacturer itself lists the endurance as 'three years', which is a little vague, but that seems about right based on our past experiences with its drives.

If you're gaming on a budget, or looking for an easy stopgap, this may well be your best bet. You'll still feel a lot of the benefit of quicker loads and boots, at a much reduced cost.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- + Low cost 500GB drive
- + Performance is still decent
- Middling overall performance
- Slow sustained random writes

SPECS CAPACITY: 500GB / **INTERFACE:** SATA 6GBPS / **SEQUENTIAL IO:** 560/520MB/S READ/WRITE / **RANDOM IO:** 75K/81K IOPS READ/WRITE / **ENDURANCE:** 3-YEAR (UNSPECIFIED)

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,162

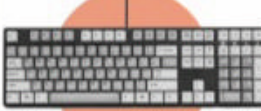
MOTHERBOARD		B360M-HDV ASRock £59 ASRock's B360M board definitely qualifies as 'no frills', but it'll still get the juice out of your CPU without bottlenecks.
PROCESSOR		Core i3-8100 Intel £143 A great processor for out-of-the-box gaming performance. Opt for the AMD Ryzen 1300X if you'd like to overclock.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 2060 Ventus 6G OC MSI £330 MSI's budget take on the RTX 2060 is lightning fast for the money, offering out-of-the-box overclocked values.
COOLER		Hyper 212 Evo CoolerMaster £26 Even a budget build can benefit from a good CPU cooler, letting you enjoy a quieter, cooler system.
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 16GB Corsair £80 16GB of RAM gives you plenty of breathing room when running multiple programs, and Corsair's selling this kit cheap.
POWER SUPPLY		CX-M Series CX550M Corsair £53 A UK price spike in our previous EVGA 500W pick opens the door for this quiet Corsair option.
SSD		MX500 250GB Crucial £38 Crucial's SSD range is fantastic value and offers good performance, too. A 250GB drive can hold your OS and essential programs.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM Western Digital £39 One terabyte of old-fashioned hard storage is the perfect home for all of your media, backups and storage-hungry games.
CASE		Neos Bitfenix £34 The Neos provides decent airflow, good support for 3.5-inch hard drives, and a fairly painless build experience.
DISPLAY		G2460PF AOC £220 This is the cheapest 144Hz gaming monitor you can buy, yet it still offers decent image quality, great performance and Freesync.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS Pro HyperX £80 A reliable and attractive board with no added frills from HyperX – plus it'll match that Stinger Core headset. Result.
MOUSE		Rival 110 SteelSeries £20 A great sensor, simple design and impressively low price make this a great entry-level gaming mouse.
HEADSET		HS35 Corsair £40 Deceptively luxurious for the price, Corsair's budget cans offer comfort and powerful low-end. Also colours. Very bright colours.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,535

MOTHERBOARD		Prime Z370 A II Asus £125 Great shielding, full of features, and featuring that – ahem – all important RGB lighting, this is a fine Asus board.
PROCESSOR		Core i5-8600K Intel £256 Six cores, six threads, good out-of-the-box clock speeds – and it's overclockable. No performance bottlenecks with this installed.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 2060 Twin Fan Zotac £330 Serious power from the 'just about affordable' end of Nvidia's new GPU fleet, and it's ray tracing-ready too.
COOLER		Hydro Series H55 Quiet Edition Corsair £55 Tidy and quiet, the H55 will unlock our CPU's overclocking potential and look good through your case window while it does so.
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 16GB (2x8GB) @2666 Corsair £80 16GB is the minimum amount of RAM we'd recommend for a system of this calibre.
POWER SUPPLY		CX 650W Corsair £60 It may not feature fancy modular design, but Corsair's reliable CX 650 is cheap enough to accommodate for our other part picks.
SSD		Evo 860 250GB Samsung £55 Samsung's Evo series has long been a stalwart of nippy r/w speeds and reliability, and this 250GB drive is very affordable.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM Western Digital £39 SSDs are great, but they're still far from cheap. This 1TB HDD will hold as many games as you will need.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £78 The clean lines, intuitive build features and fantastic price cements the Eclipse as our mid-range case of choice.
DISPLAY		Optix MAG271CR MSI £210 Curved, stylish, and offering 144Hz refresh rates, our MSI monitor pick suits pros and would-be pros alike.
KEYBOARD		One Ducky £110 A lesser known keyboard brand with a great rep among mechanical switch nerds. Ducky delivers the goods with the One.
MOUSE		G502 Proteus Spectrum Logitech £58 Logitech's revered G502 is comfortable, adjustable, and precise. Also 'Proteus Spectrum' sounds like a <i>Halo</i> map.
HEADSET		HyperX Cloud Kingston £79 Despite the budget price, we recommend this headset. There's simply nothing better for the money.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£3,791

MOTHERBOARD

**Strix X470-F Gaming**Asus **£180**

Get the most from the new AMD Ryzen 2700X with this matching X470 motherboard that's packed with features.

PROCESSOR

**Ryzen 7 2700X**AMD **£250**

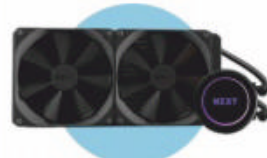
Easy to overclock and with huge performance out of the box, AMD's new flagship CPU is the one to go for.

GRAPHICS CARD

**GeForce RTX 2080Ti Black Edition**EVGA **£1,070**

EVGA's custom design is considerably cheaper than Nvidia's reference card, and with great cooling.

COOLER

**Kraken X62**NZXT **£140**

The Kraken is the culmination of three of our favourite things: an infinity mirror, a 280mm radiator and slick braided cooling.

MEMORY

**Ripjaws V 32GB @3200**G.Skill **£172**

G.Skill is always a safe bet for lightning fast RAM, and if you can do without the RGB frills this 2x16GB set will treat you right.

POWER SUPPLY

**HX750i 80 Plus Platinum**Corsair **£135**

Modular, custom cable kits, and a platinum efficiency rating. What's not to love about this Corsair PSU? Nothing, that's what.

SSD

**XPG SX8200 Pro 1TB**ADATA **£200**

A whole terabyte of M.2 storage with blistering read/write speeds, just waiting to be filled with Steam games you'll never play.

HDD

**WD Blue 4TB**Western Digital **£99**

With a large boot SSD, there's little need for a large, cheap SSD. Instead we've opted for a huge 4TB hard drive for all your bulk data.

CASE

**Enthoo Evolv ATX TG**Phanteks **£180**

The 5mm thick aluminium panels resonate with svelte professionalism, and the interior makes building inside this a dream.

DISPLAY

**AW3418DW**Alienware **£780**

34 inches of curved, beautifully presented 120Hz display with the added benefits of G-Sync. One for aesthetes and athletes alike.

KEYBOARD

**G513**Logitech **£125**

It's got the RGB backlighting without feeling too showy, but crucially the G513's Romer-G switches feel supremely comfy.

MOUSE

**G502 Lightspeed**Logitech **£130**

The Lightspeed is the very latest edition of Logi's loveable G502, and while it might look familiar nearly all internal parts are new.

HEADSET

**GSP 670**Sennheiser **£330**

Sennheiser's first wireless gaming headset shoots for audiophile territory with great control placement and 16 hours of battery.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

A beautiful bauble that will in no way protect you from Thor.



Game Saved

“Thor may be a terrifying unknowable entity rather than a jolly muscle man”

Facing the grotesque, disturbing world of **ASPULOV: END OF GODS**

I suppose I should move at some point, but the dark basement is full of furry naked men with stag heads. This has put me right off the idea of going around another corner. I've found a large backlit fan – every sci-fi corridor has one – and I'm going to bask in its meagre light until the universe ends, or my eyeballs recharge. Whatever comes first.

Apsulov: End of Gods is a grim time. You wake up on a stone operating table being sliced up by a crab-like machine with a face, gurgling as your character tries to speak through the mess of their own throat. For a second I get a powerful visualisation

TOM SENIOR



THIS MONTH
Turned his eyeballs off and on again.

ALSO PLAYED
Warhammer: Vermintide 2

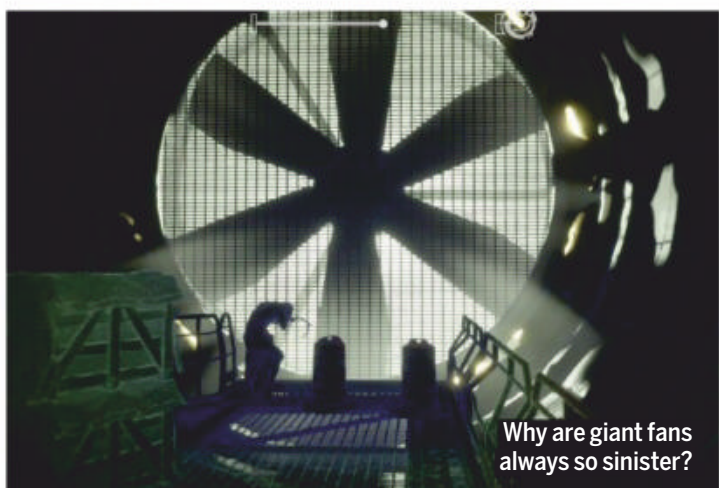
of what that must feel like, and then realise that on some deep, fundamental level I can't enjoy horror games the way I used to.

Once I would admire the grotesque imagery and enjoy the sense of shock – oh wow, that's so twisted. To nick a phrase Phil might use, I'd love a game, film, or book that truly freaked my bean. But wandering around *Apsulov's* nightmare makes me realise that the way I empathise

with imagery has changed somehow, without me even realising. I have gained an unsuppressable empathy for depictions of bodies and people. When a naked stag dude runs up and throttles me while screaming in torment, his fear and the vivid choking experience crowds my brain. And now I'm stuck in this corridor.

This is quite irritating, but probably how horror games are actually supposed to be experienced. Once my eyeballs have powered up again I activate The Sight, which

I'M CURIOUS TO SEE HOW APSULOV INTERPRETS NORSE CANON WITH A TWIST

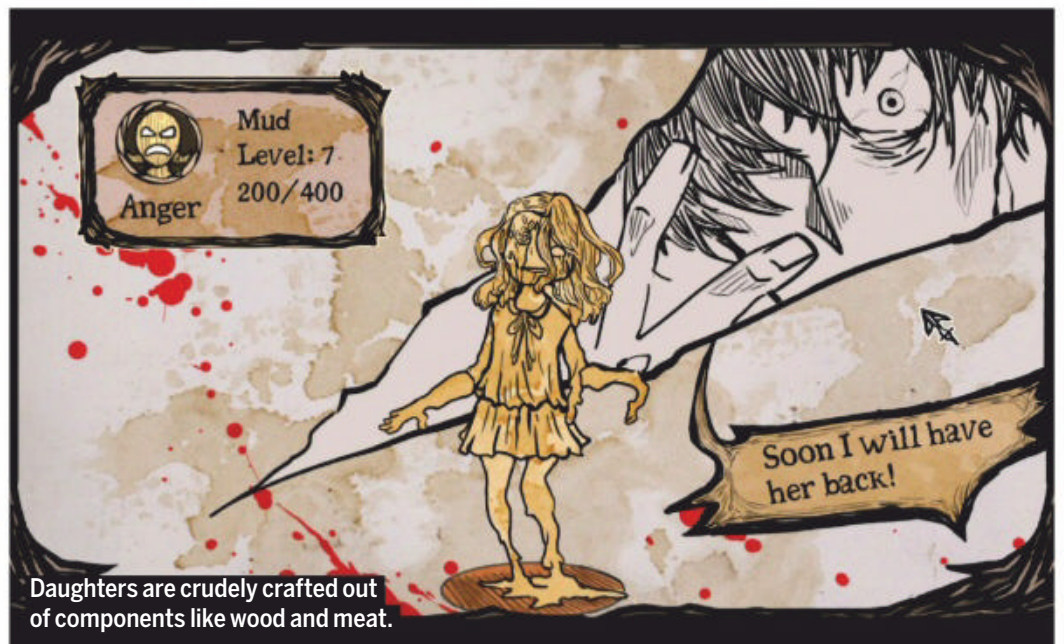


scans the darkness and outlines objects and enemies in a glittering sheen. There are a few stag guys, but they are busy clutching their heads and moaning. Nobody is having fun in this world, but I press on, because I'm curious to see how *Apsulov* interprets Norse canon with a twist.

Thanks to an audio diary I learn that the facility is being invaded by mysterious roots. The gods are responsible, it seems. The bad machine I met at the start of the game continues to talk to me through statues, and I wonder if one of the gods is tormenting me. I'm used to seeing Norse mythology in Scandinavian oral traditions and, more recently, Marvel superhero films. This is different, and I like the idea that Thor may be a terrifying unknowable entity rather than a jolly Australian muscle man.

MY EYES! MY EYES!

But in the end it's the monotony that gets me. Dark corridors give way to winding vents, and then more corridors. The idea that the game might be about cyber-Ragnarok in the far future is almost enough to keep my interest, but in the end it's too unpleasant and my eyeballs keep running out of batteries. I feel as though I need a palette cleanser. I Alt-F4 out and check PCGamer.com. What's this – *Fight Crab*, out now? I may have soured on the horror genre, but I know I'll still find crustacean-on-crustacean violence hilarious. ■



“Once they’re dead, I sell their parts”

Becoming a monster in **MY LOVELY DAUGHTER**

▶ ROBIN VALENTINE



THIS MONTH
Broke his
moral compass

ALSO PLAYED
Guardians Of The Galaxy:
The Telltale Series

If there's one thing almost all videogames are good at, it's making you think like a sociopath. Whether you're giggling as you mow down guards by the hundreds, callously calling entire nations into all-out war, or making someone love you by working out exactly the correct things to say to maximise your romance, your morality almost always takes second place to objectives, rewards, and progression systems.

I'm not sure any game, though, has turned me into quite as much of a creep as *My Lovely Daughter*. Cast as an amnesiac alchemist desperate to raise his daughter from the dead, I'm charged with creating life-like simulacrum of her, raising them to maturity, and then murdering them for resources and their 'soul essence'.

It's embarrassing how quickly I find myself shrugging off this grotesque premise and settling into an easy rhythm of exploitation. My daughters perform hard labour at the nearest village to earn me cash. Once

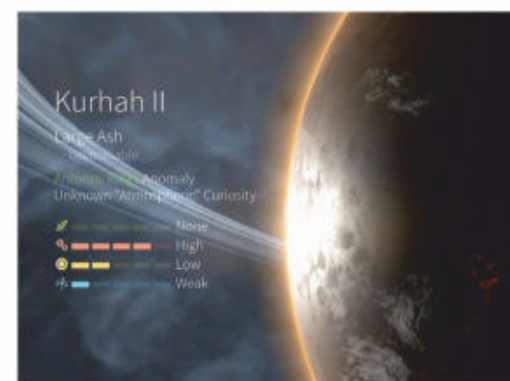
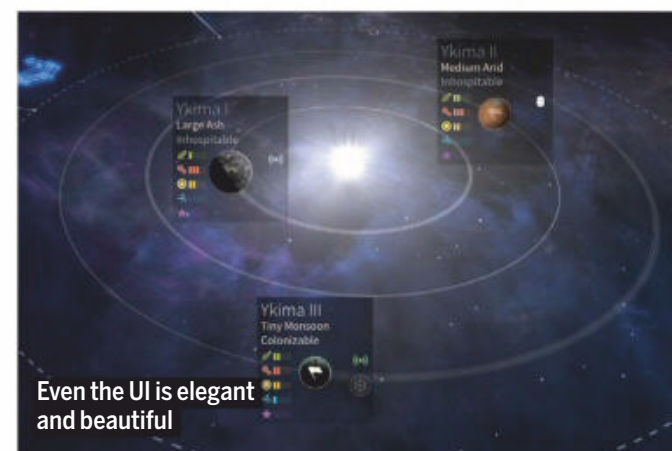
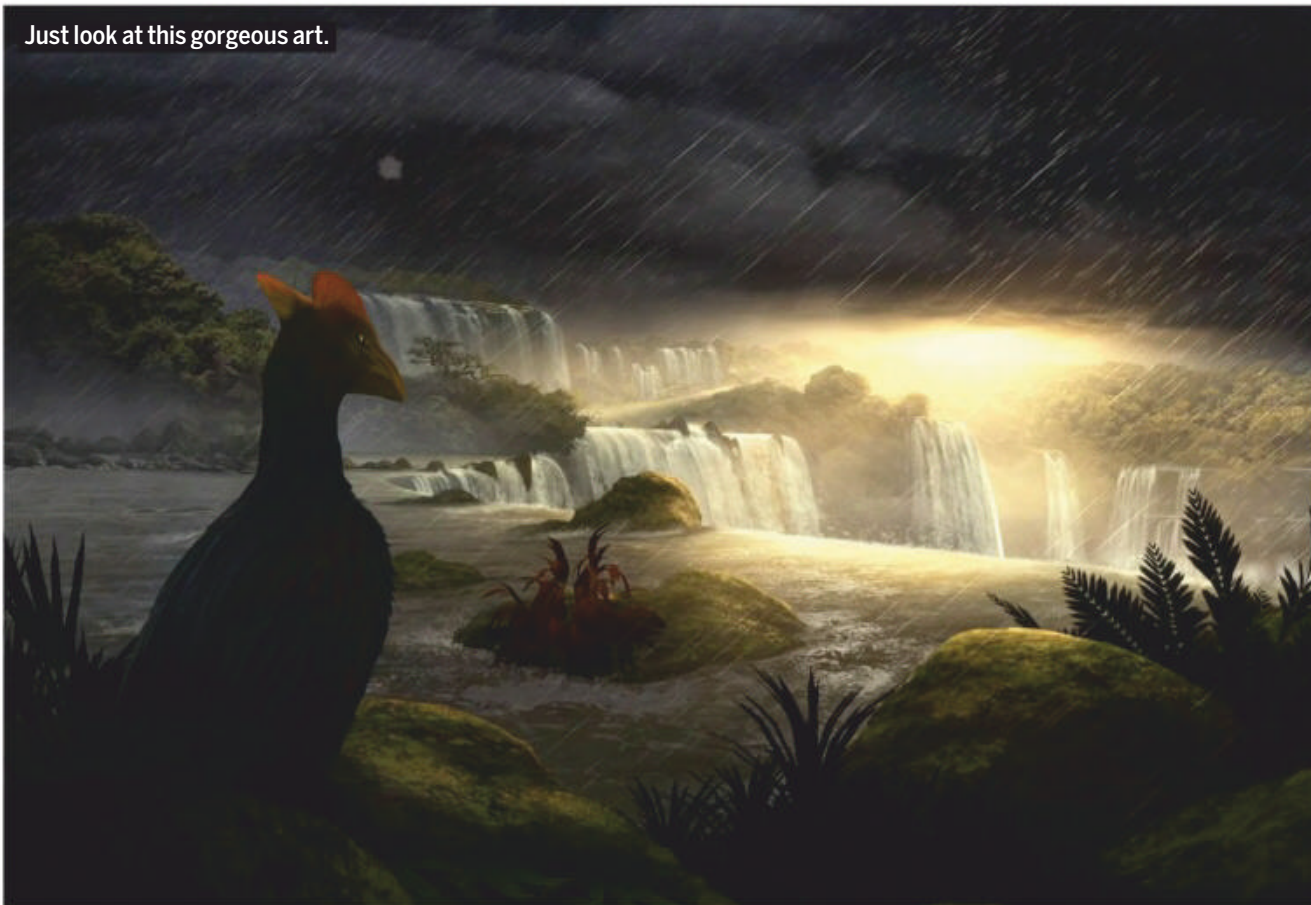
they're dead, I sell their parts for a final windfall and invest their humanity into my 'real' daughter's soul, before crafting a new homunculus to take their place.

SEVEN DADLY SINS

As I refine the process and gain upgrades, the cycle speeds up. Soon, each daughter is lucky to survive more than a week before being... processed. I stop remembering their names, then I stop spending time with them, then I stop reading their pleading letters. As my operation reaches peak efficiency, their well-being becomes nearly irrelevant to the equation.

The realisation that an indie I picked up on a whim in a Steam sale has trained me to battery farm children is not an especially pleasant one. After a lifetime of gaming all I see are the numbers, and apparently developers thus have the power to make me, in the virtual world at least, do almost anything.

"This game is intended to make people sad and uneasy but there is a deeper meaning behind the horror," reads a warning message whenever I start the game. Mission accomplished, I suppose, though I'm not sure I've really gained any insight into "child labour, abusive parenting, and ignorant societies", the themes the game purports to explore. I already knew those things were bad, I just didn't know I was willing to partake in them in order to level up. ■



“Endless Space 2 is simpler and more streamlined than a lot of 4X games”

The joy of colonising planets in **ENDLESS SPACE 2**

Half the appeal of Amplitude strategy games for me is how they feel. They really are astonishingly pretty, and nowhere is this more evident than in the process of colonising a planet in *Endless Space 2*. But it's more than just aesthetics, it's everything from the music and sound effects to the UI animation and typefaces.

When you discover a fresh, uninhabited system the camera sweeps down into it, over each world, and it's wonderfully cinematic. In one system I find a giant volcanic planet, an arid desert world, and a tiny jungle planet battered by storms.

If you have the proper technology to colonise a planet, and a colonisation ship, you can establish the first outpost. Start the procedure and you'll see a probe fly out of your ship and slam into the planet.

At first your empire will be like a sci-fi Wild West, with small, disconnected, and isolated communities scattered around your corner of the galaxy. But as each colony grows and you develop tech such as interplanetary transport, there's a palpable feeling of your

▶ ANDY KELLY



THIS MONTH
Took over the galaxy, one planet at a time.

ALSO PLAYED
No Man's Sky

humble society developing into a massive, sprawling galactic superpower. It's supremely satisfying watching your empire grow.

What kind of planets you'll find in a system is completely random. The more dangerous and inhospitable a planet is, the more difficult it will be to colonise. So if you find a lush, verdant planet you can easily found an outpost, but if it's a raging, ash-covered volcano world you'll need to research advanced technology to battle the elements.

Sometimes you'll find anomalies on planets, each of which have their own interesting flavour text and evocative artwork. On one

YOU'LL NEED TO RESEARCH ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY TO BATTLE THE ELEMENTS

rainy world I find the Fallen Gardens, a “space graveyard for vast structures of unknown provenance”, the ruins of some technologically advanced, but now long dead, civilisation. As a sci-fi fan I absolutely love this stuff and it gives the game so much colour and personality.

ENDLESS NAMELESS

Of course, a colony doesn't have to be permanent. If, for whatever reason, a planet isn't working out, you can evacuate the colonists. Or, if you prefer, you can migrate them to another planet. *Endless Space 2* is simpler and more streamlined than a lot of 4X games, but there's still an enormous amount of depth to discover, and the colonisation system is just one part of a complex, but incredibly enjoyable, whole.

I'm a casual strategy player, even finding games such as *Civilization* and Amplitude's own *Endless Legend* too much for my brain to take sometimes. But there's something about *Endless Space 2* that just clicks for me. The sci-fi setting is a big part of it, but it's also how it captures the excitement of exploring a strange, fantastic galaxy, uncovering its secrets, and making your own mark on its many glittering worlds. ■

“We’re here to kick back. We’re here to chat. And we’re here to punch rats”

Accepting mediocrity in **VERMINTIDE II: WINDS OF MAGIC**

I always knew I wasn’t a good *Vermintide II* player, but the *Winds of Magic* expansion has now given me the hard data to prove my mediocrity. The expansion introduces the concept of Weaves – short levels with modifiers that get increasingly difficult the more you complete. According to the new leaderboards, the top team as of writing has completed 124 Weaves. My team of ragtag misfits have finished one.

Sure, we could get good. We could put in the hours to get better, to overcome the challenges and earn the best rewards. My counterargument is this: we don’t really want to.

For us, *Vermintide II* has never really been about the friction of failure. We’re just not interested in walking the tightrope between success and death. We’re not here to make things harder for ourselves.

We’re here to kick back. We’re here to chat. And we’re here to punch rats. Punching rats is its own reward. Before the expansion we had at least moved up from recruit to veteran difficulty – simply because we’d finally finished all of the levels

PHIL SAVAGE



THIS MONTH
Got the juice.

ALSO PLAYED
Destiny 2, Watch Dogs 2

at the easiest difficulty and were looking for reasons to play some more. We’d gathered enough good weapons from the Commendation Chests the game is constantly awarding that it didn’t even feel like a major increase in difficulty.

Hence why it was such a shock when we attempted the Weaves. *Winds of Magic* uses a separate progression system based around gathering Essence, which you put in a glowing purple cauldron for... Warhammer reasons. Within minutes we’d redubbed it ‘rat juice’.

You use the rat juice to change and upgrade your weapons. A

SUDDENLY OUR DECENT ARSENAL WAS REPLACED WITH MOSTLY BASIC GEAR

consequence of this is that, however good your weapons are in the main campaign, you start *Winds of Magic* from the beginning of the progression curve. Suddenly our decent arsenal was replaced with mostly basic gear.

RENAISSANCE MEN

It was rough. We struggled, we failed, we persisted. Our mantra of ‘kill rats, get juice’ pulled us through. We needed the juice to swap to better weapons. We’d only get the juice if we could complete a Weave. We fought through the opening gauntlet and eventually made our way to a portal that transported us to the Weave’s final boss arena. It was scrappy but, by tactically holding the boss’s attention, we were able to revive each downed player efficiently enough to keep us all in the fight. Finally, we chewed through the boss’s health bar. The juice was ours.

In most stories this rousing moment of triumph would be the moment our ragtag group endeavoured to improve our game. But it won’t. We’ll keep playing, but at our own pace, with our own objectives – having fun, killing rats and getting juice. Mastery has its place, but not here. Not for us. ■





NO MAN'S SKY BEYOND

Putting down roots in the latest update. *By Chris Livingston*

After 200 hours spent playing *No Man's Sky* over the past three years, I've still got roughly, ooh, let's see... 18 quintillion planets left to explore. Each of those procedurally generated worlds is dotted with exotic plants, valuable minerals, alien structures and artefacts, and oddball lifeforms. But I've got more important business to attend to right now, like cooking stew to impress a food critic on an interdimensional space station.

Beyond, the latest (and biggest) free expansion to the already expansive *No Man's Sky* adds a lot to Hello Games' space sandbox. Virtual reality. 32-person multiplayer. Expanded base-building and automated resource gathering. Creature taming, farming, and riding. It also adds cooking, an activity I love (in games, not in real life), and most importantly a snooty alien NPC named Cronus who will eat anything I bring him and tell me how much he hates it.

So while countless worlds remain undiscovered I'm busy plucking impulse beans and gamma root and fungal mould from a planet's surface. I'm stuffing alien creatures full of bait and then harvesting their milk and eggs, digging through their poop for the new element enjoyably called Faecium, and sometimes killing them for meat. I've even built an auto-feeder and creature-milker, and powered them with the generators added in *Beyond*, just so I can feed and harvest these creatures without having to get my hands dirty.

Then I'm cramming all these new collected ingredients in the nutrient processor in various combinations to see what comes out. Cooking by the brute force method.

Combine a few types of meat and you'll get a stew. Milk can become cream, butter, and cheese. Sauces can be made from organs or vegetables, wheat becomes dough and dough becomes bread. While gathering,

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 9, 2016

DEVELOPER
Hello Games

PUBLISHER
Hello Games

LINK
nomanssky.com

mixing, and processing I've managed to accidentally create dishes called Cheese-And-Flesh Stew, Tangy Organ Surprise, and Horrifying Mush. (For the record, I also made a harmless-sounding Caramel Tart.) Then I visit Cronus to see how he likes my meals.

Typically, he doesn't. "I did not gag," is usually the closest he gets to a compliment or, "You have created the most average baked eggs imaginable. Quite some achievement." Often he doesn't bother with being clever. "I do not believe anything more unpleasant has passed my lips," he says when I feed him some carbon nanotubes, which I didn't even know were edible (and which apparently were not). Cronus is Simon Cowell, Gordon Ramsay, and a giant frog all rolled into one ultimate critic.

Maybe it seems weird to turn my back on endless unexplored solar systems in favour of baking pies and cooking soups for Cronus to hate, but *No Man's Sky* itself has become more focused on staying home rather than venturing out. Restless, constant

exploration of the galaxy was the core of *No Man's Sky*, the actual goal, when it first launched in 2016. Three years later it's been overhauled with several massive updates that added base-building, ground vehicles and teleporters, which encourage players to spend more time standing on planets instead of rocketing away from them. The *Beyond* update even allows you to build a base with a team, which focuses your crew on colonising one planet rather than discovering hundreds of new ones. Even the new multiplayer hub, The Nexus, doesn't need to be travelled to – a simple button press while in your spaceship will summon it to appear right in front of you.

HOME ON THE RANGE

No Man's Sky has slowly become less about racking up frequent flyer miles and more about planting roots. This isn't a bad thing, really, and it's clearly



I ALSO MADE A HARMLESS-SOUNDING CAMEL TART

what most players want. According to Sean Murray, founder of Hello Games, roughly half of players' time is spent building bases since the feature was added in the *Foundation* update and expanded upon in *Path Finder* and *Next*. And after visiting toxic planets with endless storms, dead and airless moons, or worlds filled with hostile lifeforms and angry roving sentinels, it's a natural impulse to want to settle down and build a home when you come across a beautiful and tranquil planet.

Personally, I've never been that interested in staying planetside for long. Even with everything added over the years, I still mostly stick to the core of *No Man's Sky*: jumping restlessly from system to system, looking for interesting planets, landing briefly on a few to see what's there, then blasting off again.

At least I was, until *Beyond* gave me a food processor and an alien who consumes meals and spits out insults. Now, finally, I too have a reason to hang around on a planet and cool my jets. I've got to collect some more eggs for an alien omelette. I just hope Cronus doesn't gag on it. ■

WHAT'S COOKIN'?

The culinary concoctions in No Man's Sky Beyond



PERPETUAL ICE CREAM

Viscous Custard + Frost Crystal + Anomalous Jam

LEGS-IN-PASTRY

Pie Case + Leg Meat

WAILING CAKE OF LOST SOULS

Crab 'Apple' + Wailing Batter

ABYSSAL STEW

Horrifying Mush + Hypnotic Eye

SPICY FLESHBALLS

Mystery Meat Stew + Scorching Sauce

This planet looks delicious.



The Nexus lets you meet with up to 32 players.



The right bait turns monsters into mounts.

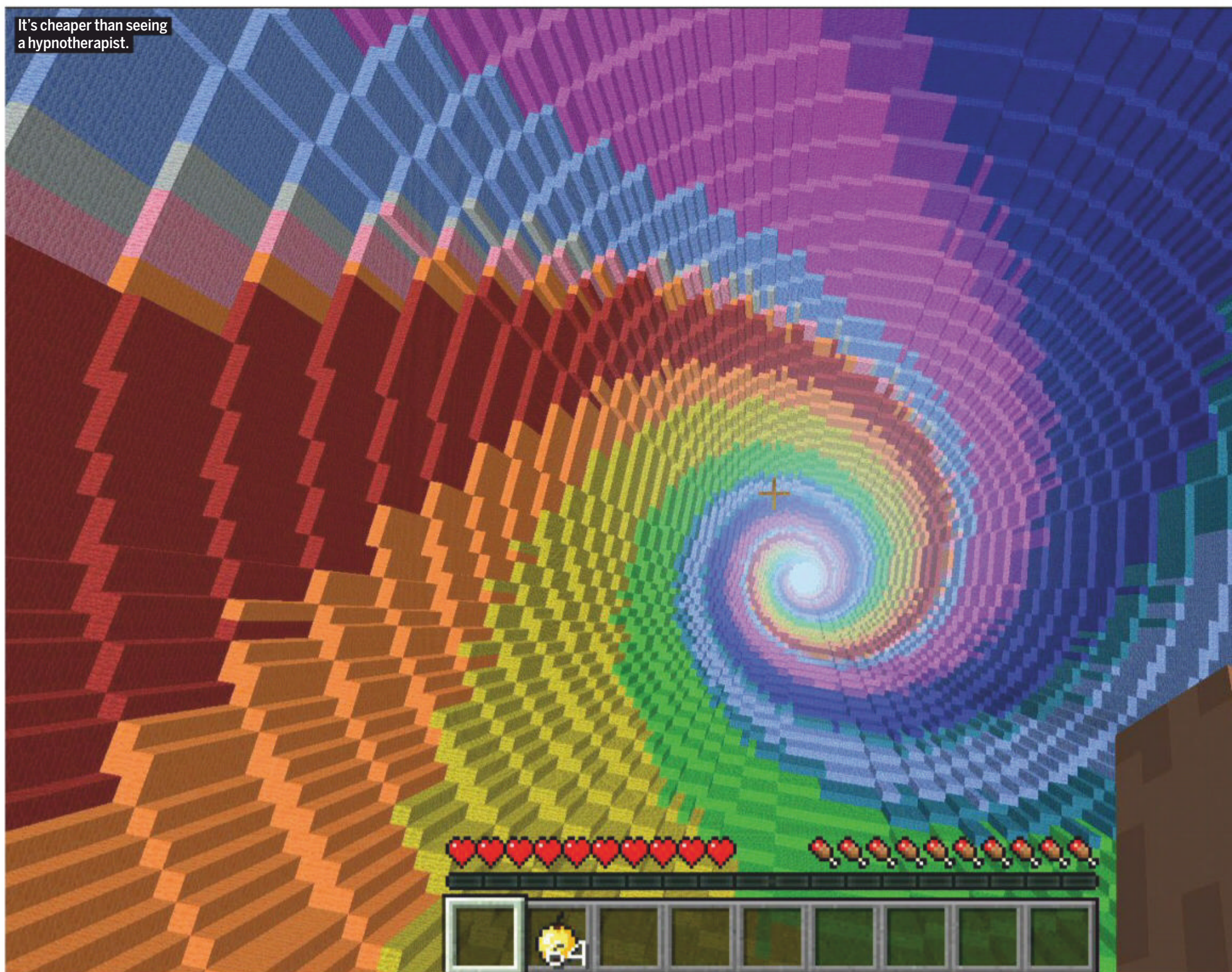


New farming equipment lets you feed and milk alien cows.



Cronus hates your food almost as much as he hates you.

It's cheaper than seeing a hypnotherapist.



They call me the hob goblin.

fails
Feelfish 28





THE DROPPER

Falling from great heights in Minecraft. *By Jeremy Peel*

I stand on a ledge hundreds of metres above the ground, looking out beyond the precipice. Below lies not Arkham City nor Metropolis, but an enormous ensuite dominated by a toilet that could double as a skate park. Pink loo roll hangs from the holder, the size of hay bale, and white tiles cover every surface except the ceiling, which extends all the way up to my vantage point.

The aim is to hit the one spot that will safely break my fall – the rancid swimming pool right in the middle of the toilet bowl. Without enough momentum, I'll splatter all over the mat, which is already patterned in a bloody red and orange, as if the owner were expecting the stain. If I overshoot, I'll smack my head on the cistern and the smell will be the least of my worries. I wonder if this is what people want when they ask for a modern day *Assassin's Creed*.

There's little point in jumping – up here, I don't need the extra height. Instead I run at full pelt over the lip, tumbling downward, gathering speed even as I shoot past the seat and connect with the water.

The splash is like the roar of an approving crowd, and I slide happily down the u-bend and out into the next level. This is *Minecraft*, the way Mojang never imagined it.

The studio is reimagining *Minecraft* at the moment, as a standalone game named *Dungeons*. It's a brave move, taking the least satisfying aspect of *Minecraft* – combat – and making it robust enough to support the weight of a *Diablo*-like dungeon crawler. Yet far bolder experiments with *Minecraft*'s form can be found in its mod archive – inventions that replace the game's most fundamental goals and leave

you with a new appreciation for the flexibility of its toolset.

It's tricky to imagine a simpler premise than that of *The Dropper*. You start at the top of a map, and your aim is to reach the bottom alive. Your enemies aren't zombies or spiders but gravity, and the jutting outcrops that will kill you instantly if you happen to catch them on your long descent downwards.

Often you're forced to make the jump all in one go, pushing against the air to redirect your avatar as it falls. Your window for readjustment is small and your mid-air movement feeble, and so the most meaningful choice you make is your angle of entry – learning from the bones snapped in your last attempt.

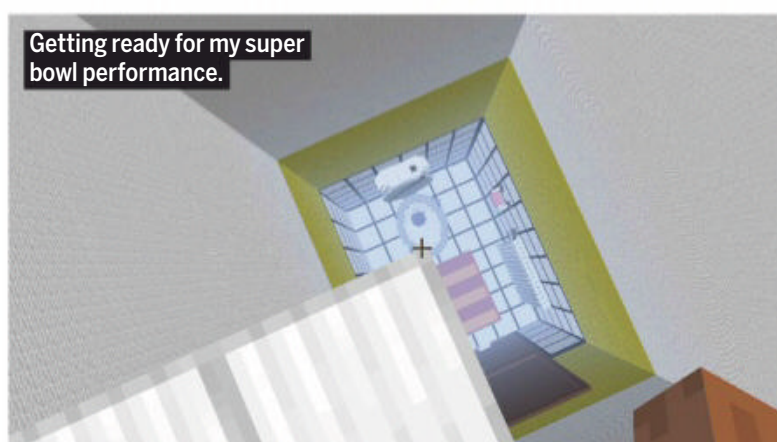


FAR BOLDER EXPERIMENTS WITH MINECRAFT'S FORM CAN BE FOUND IN ITS MOD ARCHIVE

FALL GUY

The modder Bigre is the master of this peculiar genre, and though several years old, the designer's maps still stand as its high point. As with the toilet bowl, Bigre's landing strips are usually tiny and precise, distant dots representing safety in a sea of pain. Making a touchdown is like threading a camel through the eye of a needle at 100mph.

The modder's genius is in repurposing the furniture of *Minecraft*'s survival mode as safety cushions: water can save a life from any height, thanks to the game's mercifully incomplete simulation of physics, as do webs, which slow you to a gentle descent like sticky parachutes. If you're lucky enough to



» brush up against a vine – the same found naturally generated in jungles and swamps – then that too will absorb your momentum, and even let you climb back up, adding another element of verticality to Bigre's more complex, multi-jump creations.

Success, when it comes, is so unexpected as to be surreal. I feel unsteady on my legs, the way I imagine Olympic athletes do in the seconds after pulling off the feat they've trained for, and stare upward at the assault course of blocks I've just fallen through. This is *The Dropper's* reward. Bigre's maps are built not just for function, but as art pieces. Like *Minecraft's* procedural landscapes, they have an impressionistic character that means they make more sense when viewed from a distance. More frequently than not, the real shape of a map doesn't make itself known until after the drop, when you can see the picture in its full, holistic glory.

Some are abstract spirals, helter-skelters made to turn the mind inside out as they pass by at speed. Others are riffs on more conventional *Minecraft* settings – *Mine* is a criss-cross of trundling carts and industry that recalls Isengard (a subject Bigre would return to with a plummet off the side of Saruman's tower in *The Dropper 2*). Another early map finds you zipping between trees in a forest flipped onto its side, before plunging into a vertical lake. It's where Bigre seems to find the greatest inspiration, playing with the scale and angle of everyday scenery, twisting the mundane into thrilling encounters with gravity.

The toilet bowl forms part of a multi-level experiment in domesticity which reduces you to the perspective of a Borrower. The very best is a sidelong kitchen that encourages you to move 'step by step', abseiling without a rope – hopping from the counter edge onto the blade of a chopping knife, and then drifting

across a full sink onto the relative safety of the drying rack. The joy of these levels are the regular adjustments your brain has to make just to keep up with what's in front of you. Bigre's scenes are packed with details even in the places you can't reach, seemingly built for their own sake – the magnetic letters on the fridge door, and the portrait of *Minecraft* protagonist Steve hanging impossibly on the top wall. They make you wonder what's beyond the front door, even though good sense suggests it's just the skybox.

DROP BOX

Despite the craft, *The Dropper* always feels like the work of a *Minecraft* player, rather than an artist merely working with the cheapest toolkit



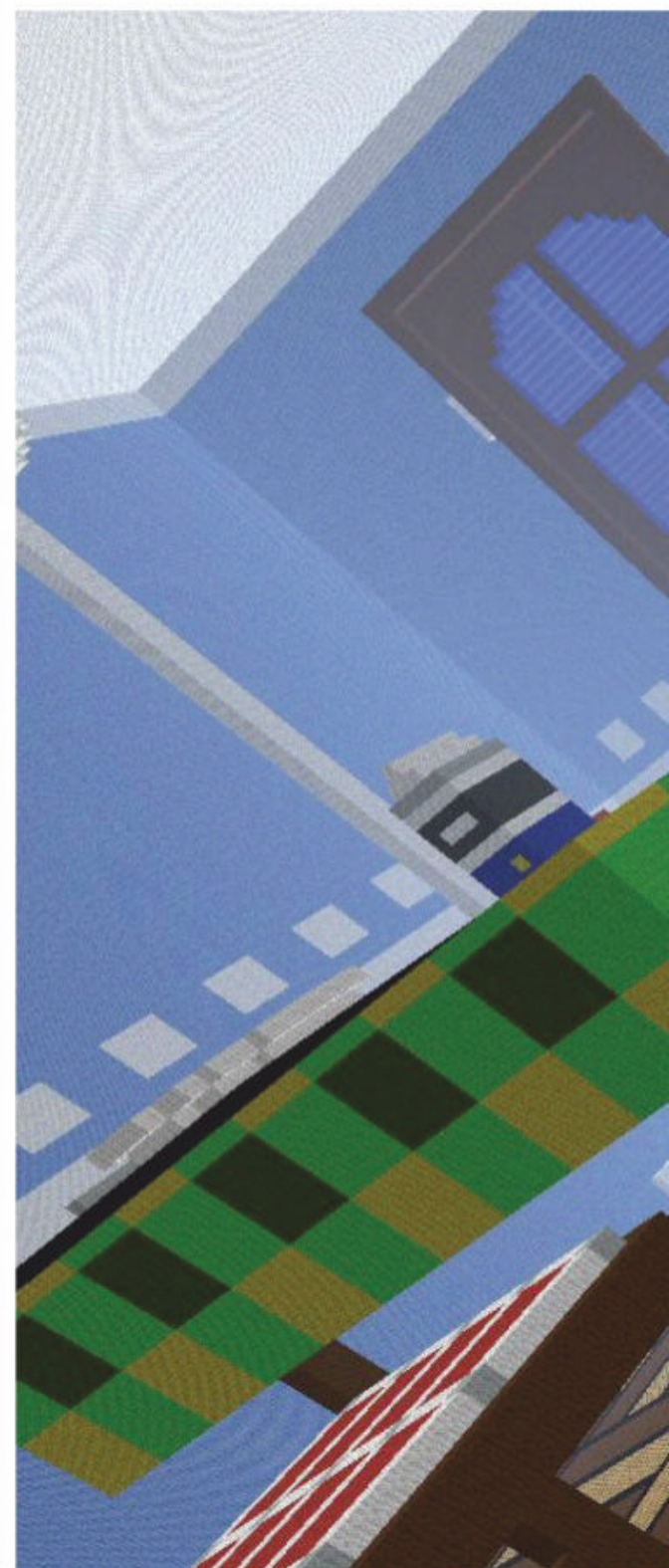
ANOTHER EARLY MAP FINDS YOU ZIPPING BETWEEN TREES IN A FOREST FLIPPED ONTO ITS SIDE

available to them. One level is made up of a series of flaming portals, each divided into four squares. Pick the wrong route and you'll crash and burn. Pick correctly and your flames will be extinguished by water blocks on the other side. It's like Takeshi's Castle without the safety regulations.

Another late-game creation positions you opposite a map of a road, winding through countryside. It's really a guide for your own movements. You have to mimic its twists and turns as you fall through a waterfall made up of Nether portal blocks. The portal takes time to do its work, and the goal is to teleport before you hit the ground. It's the kind of ingenuity that could only come from a close understanding of *Minecraft's* rules, and tests the limits of its materials.

Much less showy but equally impressive is the engineering of the corridors that take you between setpieces. Levers shunt the floor sideways, flinging you into the next level like a paratrooper. And just as you're getting used to that slick bit of pistonry, Bigre reverses it – opening the ceiling to let a staircase of sand fall into place instead. It's not just the technical prowess you feel but the care of the creator lavishing love on areas long past the point where it would make economic sense to do so.

There's so much of Bigre in this game that you start to wonder if the spaces you fall through are those from the modder's real life – if the PC modelled for the bedroom map is the one the mod was designed on. Maybe Bigre, too, sat on the edge of that toilet bowl, contemplating a dive into a project built for its own sake. It remains a testament to the power of modding as individual expression. ■



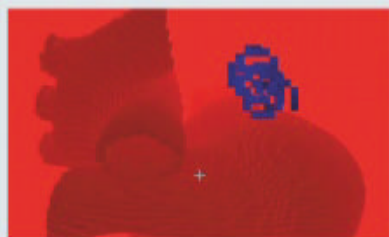
INSIDE OUT

The fruits of Bigre's fascination with anatomy



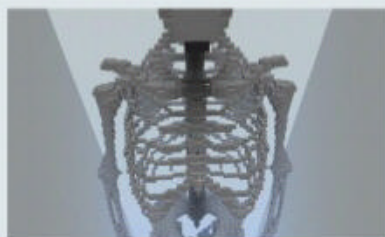
BLOOD CELLS

They give life, and a collision with one can taketh it away.



HUMAN HEART

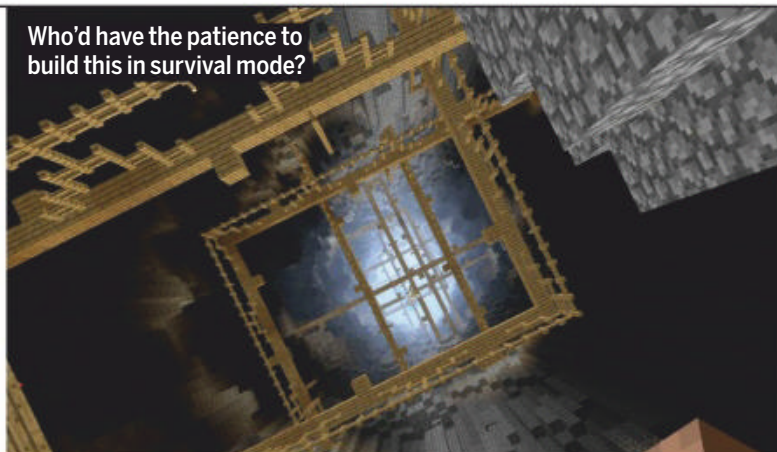
Seen here swimming in its natural environment.



SKELETON

You need to fall through this to progress – take care in those ribs.

Who'd have the patience to build this in survival mode?



Pac-Man – not famed for his grasp on maths.



Don't mind me, just crawling through a rocket lolly.



Flipped perspectives play with your mind.





DIARY

HITMAN LOTTO

PART II

James Bond meets
Groundhog Day in our latest
attempt to kill targets with
randomly chosen weapons.

By Rick Lane

THE RULES

1 Weapons chosen via a lotto spinner.

2 One weapon per target.

3 No reloads unless the game really, really annoys me.

We're in Marrakech, the Big Haggie. Agent 47 is on the trail of rogue Swedish diplomat Claus Strandberg and wannabe military dictator Reza Zaydan. We're killing targets with weapons chosen at random using a lotto spinner. Before we turn the bingo-wheel of fate, however, we need to talk about odds.

Last issue, I used a bespoke list of weapons for each level I played, assigning each weapon a number corresponding to a number in my spinner. However, I've noticed that simply listing all the weapons that appear in a *Hitman* mission skews the odds in favour of melee ones, simply because there are so many of them. Hence, for this entry, I've rewritten the list to be slightly more general, to best ensure each weapon class (gun, melee, explosive, environmental) has roughly the same number of entries on the list. You can see this updated lineup in the boxout overleaf.

This less stabby list seems to pay off immediately. The numbers for Zaydan and Sandberg respectively are four, which is an automatic weapon, and 16 – lethal poison. One loud, one quiet, neither melee.

Strandberg is holed up in the Swedish embassy south of the market, while Zaydan is preparing his coup at a former nursery school to the east.

GUNMAN, CHRONICLES

I decide to head for Zaydan first, the first of multiple mistakes I'm going to make on this mission. I start out by re-familiarising myself with the twists and turns of Marrakech market. As I do so, I overhear a conversation about the school's former headmaster, who still has the school's master key. I sneak up to the rooftop garden where the headmaster is, and quietly steal his keyring.

Now I need to get past the security checkpoints, so I start scouting for a military uniform to steal. The streets are way too busy, so again I look to the rooftops. Eventually I find a soldier whose patrol takes him to a quiet spot in a rooftop garden. I knock him out with a

wrench, don his uniform, and hide the body. This turns out to be a complete waste of time, as the uniform I've nicked is for a rank too junior to get past the checkpoint.

Frustrated, I wander around some more, until I find a guarded entrance to a shop. Hopefully there's a way through to the school. Sneaking past the guards here is easy. I slip through the shop to the rear exit, where there's a small, walled-off courtyard.

As it happens, this route leads to a secret tunnel running under the market to the embassy's car-park. I make a note of it for later. Right now, I'm more interested in the lone soldier wandering around wearing a more senior uniform. I knock him out, change clothes, and take his assault rifle, which is exactly what I need to kill Zaydan. Suitably disguised, I make my way to the school undisturbed, using the key to get inside. Reza Zaydan is

milling around both floors of the school. He doesn't have any bodyguards, but with so many soldiers patrolling the school, he doesn't need them. Killing him with a Very Loud Gun is going to be tricky.

I spend a good 20 minutes examining his circuit of the school.

Eventually I notice that he

stops by a window on the first-floor corridor, while behind him is an empty classroom with a clear line-of-sight. I stand inside and wait for him to come around again, before putting an end to his ambitions with a single shot to the head.

Not very subtle, but it was never going to be. I hope for a repeat of Paris, where I slipped out the window quickly enough that nobody clocked the creepy bald dude making a very quick exit. Sadly, trained soldiers are slightly more perceptive than fashionista bodyguards. The dreaded notification "Hunted" appears in the bottom-left corner of the screen. I hide until the heat dies down, but my disguise has been compromised, meaning I must sneak out of the school grounds.

I can't walk through the checkpoint either, so I shimmy up a drainpipe and creep along a ledge, stumbling right back into the headmaster's garden.

Goddamn it. After all that effort, I could've just slipped down the drainpipe straight into the school. I take out my frustration on the headmaster, knocking him out and nicking his clothes.

Now I need to find some lethal poison, so I look up the locations on the *Hitman* Interactive Map. There are two lethal poison pickups. One is back at the school (sod that). The other is down in that secret entrance I noticed earlier. Retracing my steps, I slip past the guards again and descend. The tunnel reads as a hostile area, so I return upstairs and change into that basic soldier uniform I stole earlier. Ugh, still hostile. The only disguise that will work down here is the one I have already compromised. Smashing.

I've no choice but to press on. The underground corridor leads to a square chamber bristling with both

THE ONLY DISGUISE THAT WILL WORK IS THE ONE I'VE ALREADY COMPROMISED





» guns and guards. It's going to take some masterful stealth to get that poison unnoticed. Fortunately, I don't need to worry about this for long, as I completely screw up knocking out the first guard, alerting the whole room to my presence and ending up in a massive gunfight.

I prevail, but I end up killing somewhere between five and ten non-targets, which in *Hitman*'s book is a disaster. Reluctantly, I step over the corpses to pick up the poison and carry on. The car park is crawling with more of Zaydan's goons, but I manage to creep through without being spotted. I then sneak across the front of the embassy to a small guardpost where I pick up an embassy security guard uniform.

This mission has been a complete mess, but I at least end on a high, sneaking into Strandberg's office and poisoning his wine unnoticed.

By the time he drinks the poison, I'm already outside the embassy. It's a somewhat hollow victory, but at least I feel like I earned the single star I'm awarded for my otherwise dreadful performance.

BANGKOK DANGEROUS

Somehow *Hitman 2* doesn't delete my save out of sheer embarrassment, and in a jiffy we're off to Bangkok, specifically the exclusive Club 47 Hotel. My targets here are Jordan Cross, indie rock-band megastar and weapons-grade arsehole, and his equally nasty lawyer Ken Morgan.

KILL LIST

Weapon bingo

Here's the updated, slimmed down list, intended for a fairer distribution of weapon-types.

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Pistol (unsilenced) | 11. Fire Extinguisher |
| 2. Pistol (silenced) | 12. Propane Flask |
| 3. Shotgun | 13. Remote Explosive |
| 4. Automatic | 14. Poison |
| 5. Sniper Rifle | 15. Crushing |
| 6. Knife | 16. Falling |
| 7. Sword | 17. Drowning |
| 8. Axe | 18. Electrocution |
| 9. Cleaver | 19. Other Environmental |
| 10. Tool (scissors, screwdriver etc) | 20. Fiber Wire |

The numbers that roll out of my lotto machine are next-door neighbours. Jordan Cross gets 16, which is death by falling, and Ken Morgan gets 17, which is drowning.

After the mess in Marrakech. I'm relieved by the clean and quiet approaches the machine has chosen. It almost seems a like a sign. Turns out it's more of an omen.

Let's quickly go over Cross. As far as I know, there's only one way to kill Jordan Cross via a fall. That's by playing through a mission story wherein Agent 47 infiltrates Cross' recording session in the guise of a replacement drummer. This is the method I follow. There might be other ways to do it, but given what happens next, I'm glad I opted for the straightforward approach.

With Cross dead, my attention turns to Ken Morgan. I'm told in the

mission briefing that Morgan hangs out in around the restaurant area, so my first thought is to spike the restaurant food with emetic rat poison, then drown Morgan in whichever toilet he subsequently chunders into. Unfortunately, when I try this, Morgan instead empties his stomach into a nearby bin. Unless it hasn't been emptied for a long time, typically you can't drown someone in a bin, so that's the end of Plan A.

Fortunately, Club 47 is located at the side of a river, and Morgan's circuit of the hotel takes him to a patio area on the riverside. My new plan is to knock him out, then haul him over the balustrade into the water below. But there's a small issue with Plan B, namely all the witnesses in this very public area. Not only does Morgan have a bodyguard shadowing him, there are five hotel staff in close proximity, another guest who frequently walks through the area to talk on his phone, and a gardener trimming the verges nearby.

The locations of these individuals are burned into my mind, because I try countless times to enact this plan. I try poisoning the bodyguard to get Morgan alone. I try knocking out all the nearby witnesses. I try tossing coins to get Morgan into a position where he can't be seen by anyone. I try completely losing my shit and murdering half the hotel. It all ends the same way, panic, chaos and death. Finally, after over an hour of this nonsense, I succeed in getting Morgan over the rail without anyone noticing. I celebrate for exactly one microsecond before I hear the loud crunch of Morgan's body landing on the rocks beside the river. Fffffffuuuuuuuuu-

At this point it's clear that drowning might not be a viable tactic for Morgan. Certainly not for someone of my limited skill. So the only thing I can do is spin the wheel again. Out rolls number 11 – fire extinguisher. Oh great, explosives, the perfect weapon for assassinating one specific person in an extremely public area.

I feel like giving up and going back to my virtual hotel room. Then I have an idea. The area where Morgan makes his phone call, although highly visible, is vacant of people most of the time.

What's more, my hotel room balcony looks down on that same corner of the front patio. As I mentioned in the first diary, I always bring a sniper rifle as my smuggled item, which is located in my hotel room.

I rush upstairs, grab the sniper rifle, and check to see if the shot is viable. I can't clearly see the actual area where Morgan makes his phone calls, as it's obscured by folding





screens. But there is narrow stretch that he walks through where I can get a clear shot. Plan C is officially a go. I head downstairs, grab a fire extinguisher off the wall, and drop it outside, much to the confusion of everyone around me. Then I head back up, get into position, wait for the moment, and take the shot.

Rather than detonating on impact, the shot kicks the fire extinguisher away. It explodes a second or so later. Morgan goes down, but isn't killed. I have just enough time to spit a curse at my screen before security busts down the door of my room and riddles me with bullets.

On reload, I decide to try the same thing, but this time with three fire extinguishers. Again the explosion isn't powerful enough to kill Morgan. At this point I've been playing this mission for over two hours, so I decide fuck it, no more half measures. I put every fire extinguisher I can find in a pile,

then add a propane flask for good measure. If you want to get technical, I'm pretty sure the concussive blast of an exploding propane flask would extinguish any nearby fires. It would just cause a lot of other fires in the process.

After a heart-pounding wait, Morgan appears. I take the shot. The resulting explosion throws his body ten

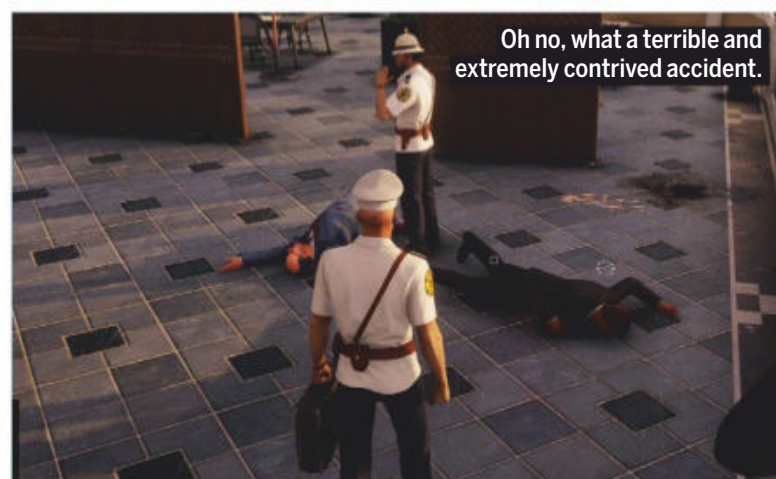
feet in the air, and the blessed words "Target Eliminated" appear on my screen. I quickly pack away the sniper rifle, exiting the room just as the guards burst in. (I'm dressed as a guard, by the way, and have been for almost the entire mission.)

All that for one target.

But at least I put the 'bang'

in Bangkok. Ho ho. Morgan's death even registers as "Accidental", which is fantastically stupid. The next stop is Colorado, where there are four targets I need to eliminate, all surrounded by gun-toting militia. I've got a feeling it's going to be quite the show. Until next time! ■

AFTER A HEART-POUNDING WAIT, MORGAN APPEARS. I TAKE THE SHOT





REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



Not quite as impressive as the Vinewood sign in GTA V.

GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS

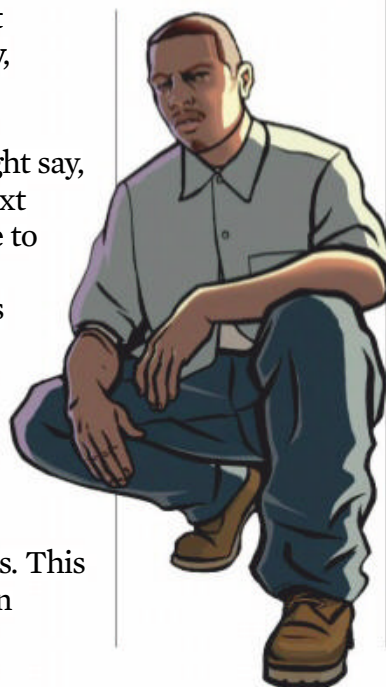
Revisiting Rockstar's most ambitious open world. *By Andy Kelly*

You can fit *San Andreas* into *Grand Theft Auto V* several times over, yet the former still feels bigger. That's the most surprising takeaway from my time revisiting Rockstar's '90s crime epic, which has sold a staggering 21 million copies in its lifetime. Released on PC in 2005, a year after the PlayStation 2 version, it's a massive step up from the previous game, *Vice City*, in pretty much every respect.

In the early-to-mid 2000s you couldn't move for *GTA* clones: *True Crime*, *The Getaway*, *Scarface: The*

World is Yours, *Saints Row*. But while these games were largely, or entirely, set in a single city, Rockstar used its unmatched financial might (and, some might say, hubris) to take things to the next level, presenting an entire state to cause mayhem in. California analogue *San Andreas* contains acres of country, a desert, and three cities: Los Santos, San Fierro, and Las Venturas.

The first 15 hours of *San Andreas* take place in Los Santos, Rockstar's satirical recreation of 1990s Los Angeles. This is not LA as it really was, but an exaggerated version of the city



viewed through the lens of movies such as *Boyz n the Hood* and *Menace II Society*, and through the music of Snoop Dogg and NWA. It's all lowriders, orange sunsets, police helicopters scanning the streets with searchlights, and gangbangers swigging forties on the corner.

Protagonist Carl 'CJ' Johnson, an ex-gangster, returns home to Los Santos from Liberty City to bury his mother, but soon finds himself tangled up in the life of petty gang violence he tried to leave behind.

To prevent you from immediately just leaving Los Santos and heading out to explore the rest of the state, corrupt cop Frank Tenpenny (played brilliantly by Samuel L Jackson) warns CJ that if he tries to skip town, the full weight of the law will come crashing down on him.

Of course, you're still going to try. The first time I played *San Andreas* I made a beeline straight for San

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
2005

DEVELOPER
Rockstar North

PUBLISHER
Rockstar Games

LINK www.rockstargames.com/sanandreas



I'd love to see a modern GTA game set in Las Venturas.



Fierro, the game's version of San Francisco. But the moment you leave the boundaries of Los Santos you get a maximum wanted level, surviving which is pretty much impossible. Today, open worlds rarely keep you contained in one part of the map – and certainly not for as long as *San Andreas* does. But for a game this size I think it's a good idea.

COUNTRY LIFE

When you finally finish the first act, you almost feel like you've been in Los Santos for the length of an entire GTA game. Which makes the moment when CJ is dumped in the countryside by Tenpenny even more exciting. Gone are the traffic-clogged streets and the endless sea of buildings. You're surrounded by trees, mountains, and rivers. Even the cars and pedestrians change to reflect your new surroundings, with the lowriders and gangsters replaced by hillbillies and trucks.

Rockstar pulls the same trick here, containing you in the countryside as you complete a series of missions for crazed bank robber Catalina and paranoid hippy The Truth. What I love about this section of the game is

STATE OF PLAY

A guide to the state of San Andreas

1 SAN FIERRO Rockstar's version of San Francisco. Landmarks include San Fierro Bay, the Gant Bridge, and the Big Pointy Building. There are a lot of hills in the city and the weather is often rainy.

2 BAYSIDE Cross the Gant Bridge from San Fierro and you'll end up in Bayside, a small town modelled after Marin County. Alas, other than the Bayside Marina, there isn't much of note to find here.

3 BONE COUNTY The largest continuous landmass in San Andreas. Here you'll find the Sherman Dam, a few small desert towns, and Area 69, a heavily guarded military base where you can steal a jetpack.



4 LAS VENTURAS Rockstar's take on Las Vegas. Like its real-world counterpart it's a city of sin, with a number of large casinos including the Four Dragons, Caligula's Palace, and the, er, Clown's Pocket.

5 RED COUNTY A rugged rural area featuring rivers, valleys, farms, and forests. Locations include Hilltop Farm, from which you can see both Los Santos and Las Venturas if the weather is clear enough.

8 WHETSTONE In this rustic, tree-lined rural region you'll find the small town of Angel Pine and the colossal Mount Chiliad towering over it, which planes seem to crash into at an alarming rate.

7 FLINT COUNTY A forested region lying west of Los Santos and the least populated part of the state. There are no towns, making it the perfect place to hide away from the searching eyes of the law.

6 LOS SANTOS Rockstar's first parody of Los Angeles. Although not quite as detailed as its GTA V cousin, it still features many of the same landmarks, including the famous Vinewood sign and Grove Street.



Los Santos is the most detailed of the three cities.



Grove Street is your home in the first act of the game.



For a 15 year old game, its visuals hold up well.

how, occasionally, you catch tantalising glimpses of San Fierro in the distance – most notably the Gant Bridge (Rockstar's take on the Golden Gate Bridge) and the Big Pointy Building, a parody of the Transamerica Pyramid. The game seems impossibly big at times.

SHORT ORDER

Playing *San Andreas* today, there's a sense Rockstar bit off more than it could chew. The game's draw distance is incredibly short, with a huge amount of pop-in, which was presumably the only way they could get the thing running on the hardware of the time.

There's also a noticeable drop in fidelity once you leave Los Santos, with San Fierro, and especially Las Venturas, feeling a little sparse and lifeless compared to the smaller cities from the previous 3D-era games.

But it feels massive, which I think is a combination of that draw distance obscuring the view ahead, and also the sheer amount of relatively empty space on the map. The countryside and desert in *San Andreas* seem genuinely barren and remote, while the rural areas in

Grand Theft Auto V never feel totally isolated from the busier parts of the map. When you're riding through the desert west of Las Venturas, or the rugged rural expanse of Red County, you feel totally disconnected from civilisation, which adds to its sense of scale.

San Andreas is a highly moddable game, and it's possible to massively expand the draw distance in the PC version. But this removes that illusion of size, especially when you can see all three cities from one high vantage point. If you want to explore the map

with a little more visual fidelity, a mod that transplants the entirety of *San Andreas* into *GTA IV* is available, although the clash of modern lighting and old school geometry is a little jarring to look at.

When CJ eventually reaches San Fierro, the look, feel, and tone of the game changes dramatically. The warm haze of Los Santos is replaced by a cold, blue-tinted colour palette, rain, and fog, and CJ gets involved with the Triads, street racing, and buying property. This variety is one of *San Andreas*' strong points,



CUT IT OUT *Last minute changes to San Andreas*

Despite its massive size, a lot of content was cut from *San Andreas* before release. Famously, a skateboard was supposed to be in the game, but was removed for unknown reasons. Animations and images for the board can still be found in the game files. Animals were also supposed to feature, roaming the countryside. The models are still in the game data, but they were never implemented. And it was reported that CJ would have been able to rob stores in an earlier version of the game. You can find an exhaustive list of cut content on grandtheftwiki.com.





THE WORLD IS STILL FUN TO EXPLORE, BUT THE MISSIONS HAVEN'T AGED WELL AT ALL

although the story does lose some steam here. Rockstar is generally very good at telling long, compelling stories that take place across vast maps, but in *San Andreas* there are several points where the narrative sags and interest wanes.

But by the time CJ hits the Last Venturas strip, things gear up to the point where *San Andreas* feels more like a James Bond game. From that first bicycle ride through downtown Los Santos to jumping out of planes and robbing casinos, the classic *GTA* rags-to-riches story is at its most heightened and absurd here. When *GTA IV* opted for a more subdued, grounded story, fans often cried out for a return to the over-the-top action of *San Andreas* – a request fulfilled by its excellent *Ballad of Gay Tony* DLC, which restored some of that frivolity.

The story comes full circle as CJ returns to Los Santos to settle the score with his treacherous former

allies, now packing a massive arsenal of weapons and huge amounts of cash. It's fun to see CJ grow from the broke, skinny kid in a tank-top to the tattooed, muscular, jewellery-laden crime boss he ultimately becomes.

Of course, his appearance is completely up to you. I know someone who finished *San Andreas* and never changed his clothes, hair, or body at all, apart from when a mission required it. While I must have spent at least ten hours of my total playtime getting my CJ looking as cool as possible.

MISSION CONTROL

San Andreas is difficult to play nowadays. The world is still fun to explore, but the missions themselves haven't aged well at all. The shooting is clunky, the driving feels twitchy and weightless, and it's punishingly difficult – especially in the final act. And the less said about those tedious RC missions given by San Fierro nerd Zero (voiced by David 'Tobias Fünke' Cross) the better. Honestly, if you feel the need to return to the state of *San Andreas*, just download a completed save file and enjoy exploring the world without any hassle.

I don't think even Rockstar could make anything with this level of scope today. With the fidelity expected of a modern game, an open world with three distinct cities would be a tall order. Its most recent, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, is its biggest yet, but benefits from being set in a time when much of the United States was countryside. This makes *San Andreas* something of a one off. A snapshot of Rockstar at its most brash, bold, and ambitious, showing the pretenders that they were still the king of the open-world crime epic.

Vice City is arguably a better, tighter game, but this was a fine final chapter for *GTA*'s all-conquering PlayStation era. It was also one of the first worlds that was so big it generated its own mythology, inside and outside of the game. Whether it was bigfoot, UFOs, ghost cars, or chainsaw killers, an entire community emerged dedicated to documenting and discovering the weird stuff Rockstar hid in its world. I myself saw a UFO in *San Andreas*. It was hovering over a bridge in the countryside. Then it zipped off when I approached. It could've been a glitch, but I want to believe. ■



WHY I LOVE

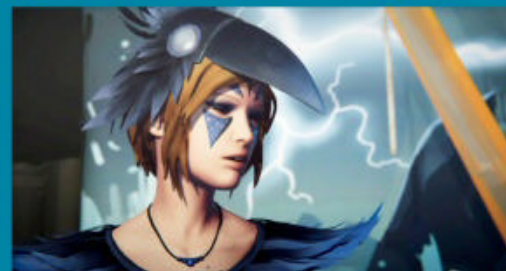
WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

CHLOE PRICE

The teen so nice they gamed her twice. *By Luke Kemp*



RIGHT: *Before The Storm* contains a beautifully awkward performance from Chloe in a production of *The Tempest*.



Of all the characters in the countless games I've played over the years, it seems odd that I've grown most attached to this one. I'm old enough to remember when mobile phones had aerials, Ricky Gervais was funny, and old episodes of *Top Of The Pops* didn't come across as *Crimewatch* musicals. Why on Earth would I find myself so drawn to a fictional rebellious teenager?

After all, Chloe Price's character is drawn with rough edges. Although she's referred to in-game as a punk, her style is more a mixture of punk, grunge, and emo (or as I like to call it, "pungeo"). Despite this, when she puts on music in her car or in her bedroom, she unerringly listens to marshmallow-soft indie rock, sometimes even dancing as though she's put on a completely different song. As for *Life Is Strange's* prequel series *Before The Storm*, where Deck Nine took the reins from Dontnod, she's sometimes a caricature. Her dialogue there is peppered a little too liberally with swears, and the first episode begins with her flipping to middle fingers at a Keep Out sign she purposefully ignores. Gosh!

None of that is nearly enough to stop me thinking of her as a long-distance friend. This is partly due to Ashly Burch's phenomenal performance in *Life Is Strange* and all credit too to Rhianna DeVries, whose portrayal of Chloe in *Before The Storm* was far better than I had dared hope. These two brought Chloe to life in a way that made me feel her pain, share her laughter, and care about her future.

PRICE WAR

Vitality, Chloe is not a rebel for the sake of rebelliousness. Her story,

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
January 30, 2015

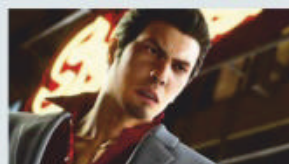
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masterfully told by narrative osmosis rather than linear lecturing, is a tragic and oddly familiar one. Once a bright student excelling at science, she lost her dad in a car crash. Around the same time, her best friend Max moved away, and failed to keep in touch over the years; something that, although not explicitly explored at length, clearly cut Chloe very deep. She ended up turning to drugs and petty crime, her feelings of pain and resentment intensifying when her mother started a new relationship with a man Chloe did not approve of.

She loves her mum, and she knows that her behaviour hurts her – but she does not, cannot, stop. This fact might seem inconsequential but, for me, it is one of the main things that makes her human.

Chloe feels like a real person to me, with all the flaws and stupid mistakes that entails. It turns out that this affection isn't a one-way street. Four years after I first met her, Chloe gave me something back.

My eldest daughter is currently trudging through the swamp of her early teenage years, occasionally looking back at her family to sigh at enormous volume. She's a high-functioning autistic child, and in recent years has become incredibly emotionally attached to several fictional characters.

Chloe represents the first time this has happened for her in a videogame. While I don't feel attached to, say, Loki or Bucky Barnes, I do find myself caring strongly for Chloe. This

has become a new patch of common ground for us to connect.

TEEN WORK

I sat with my daughter for the majority of her playthroughs of both games. It was interesting to see her rapidly grow attached, and to see that she often made the same choices I did (although I had Words following her decision to steal charity money from the principal's desk).

Fiction has to work very hard to make me cry, but I cried at the *Life Is Strange* ending where Chloe dies. My

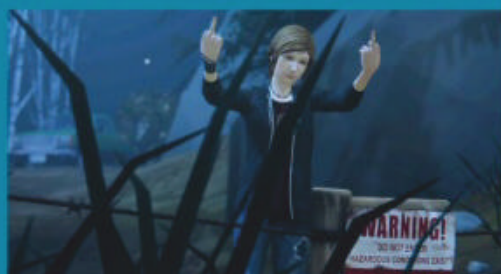
VITALITY, CHLOE IS NOT A REBEL FOR THE SAKE OF REBELLIOUSNESS

daughter did too, to the extent that she was still upset a few days later. Neither of us would have had this reaction if Chloe didn't feel real. For us, to all intents and purposes, she is real. We both mourned the loss of a friend, and felt deep sorrow at the fact that this friend didn't express her feelings for the woman she loved until it was too late.

But! The alternate ending sees both Max and Chloe survive (and, er, the rest of the town die). This is where the comics written by Emma Vieceli pick up, and we've begun reading these, too. We'll stick with Chloe to the end. Because, after all, what are friends for? ■

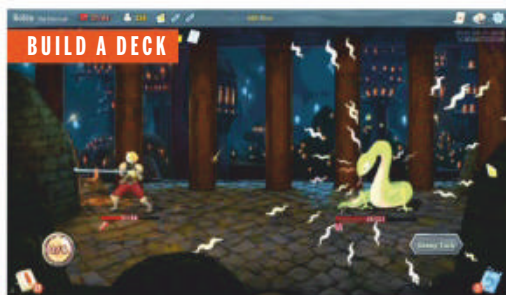


LEFT: In the alternate timeline where Chloe's dad survives, she becomes paralysed and, to my horror, even suicidal.



ROBIN
VALENTINE

I've not actually played any of these, I'm just a compulsive liar. Anyone know if they're any good?



SLAY THE SPIRE

www.megacrit.com

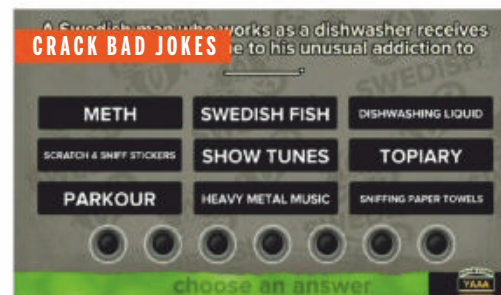
→ Two years in a row, I've put more hours into this card-based roguelike than any other game. Each run is a tense balancing act – you're constantly fighting just to survive, but at the same time you must always be refining your deck into a weapon strong (or broken) enough to defeat the final boss.



STELLARIS

www.paradoxplaza.com

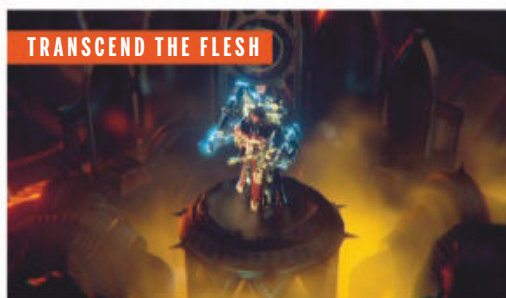
→ While it can't compete with *Crusader Kings II* for sheer intricacy, I love the tangled sci-fi stories this grand strategy title generates. And it's unbelievably well supported – three years of constant patching has transformed it into a radically different, even more compelling beast than it was on launch in 2016.



THE JACKBOX PARTY PACK

jackboxgames.com

→ There are no digital icebreakers better than this excellent party game collection and its many sequels. Instead of a controller, you use your mobile phone's browser, making it brilliantly accessible, and its best mini-games make you and your friends' shared sense of humour the star of the show.

WARHAMMER 40,000:
MECHANICUS

www.mechanicus40k.com

→ Among countless *Warhammer* games, this modest *XCOM*-like stands out for its brilliantly clever writing. Bringing to life a cast of transhumanist cyborg priests, it revels in the humour and weirdness of Games Workshop's setting, instead of just its grimdarkness.



MOUNT YOUR FRIENDS

www.stegersaurus.com

→ Despite its ridiculous set-up (buff men in speedos must clamber over each other to get as high up as they possibly can), this local multiplayer classic comes the closest of any game I've played to truly recreating the drama, tension, and competition of a real sporting event – you'll gasp, you'll groan, you'll roar in triumph.



ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY

assassinscreed.ubisoft.com

→ To my mind a severely underrated outing for the series. Sure, it's got plenty of Ubisoft bloat, but its massive, beautifully detailed world is one of the most impressive development feats in years. It feels truly endless – I've been dipping in and out since launch and I still haven't even reached the DLC yet.



THE FALL

www.overtthemoongames.com

→ A fascinating sci-fi tale that casts you as the AI in an unconscious astronaut's space suit. To protect him, you must find ways to bend your own strict programming, along the way exploring the very concept of free will. By turns philosophical and funny, but never pretentious, and the ambitious sequel is great too.



THE QUIET MAN

thequietman.square-enix-games.com

→ I genuinely recommend Square Enix's bizarre brawler to anyone who loves games. Not because it's good (it isn't), but because it's the most fascinating trainwreck of the decade, a misfire so absolute that it's amazing to remember that it was originally announced during a major publisher's E3 conference.



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